Ovi History

THE FATE OF EMPIRES IN SVENSKSUND

The Battle of Svensksund (July 9–10, 1790) was the largest naval battle in Baltic Sea history.

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

The Fate of Empires in Svensksund

Ovi History

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Contents

Prologue	7
Svensksund, July 1790	11
The dramatic sinking of the St Nikolai	23
The Archipelago Fleet	34
A King's gamble	45
The powder keg of the Baltic	58
The secret war behind the battle	69
The treaty of Värälä	81
The birth of Kotka	91
A Russian perspective	101
A time capsule on the seabed	110
The Battle of Svensksund in Swedish national memory	119
Lessons from Svensksund	129
Lessons for the Modern Age	136

Prologue

On July 9, 1790, the narrow coastal channels of the Baltic Sea erupted into an inferno of wood, iron and black powder. The Second Battle of Svensksund remains the largest naval clash in Baltic history; a dramatic two-day epic where an underdog Swedish force shattered the imperial ambitions of Catherine the Great.

Yet, to look at Svensksund purely as a clash of ships is to miss the point. As we explore in this issue, it was a grand, high-stakes gamble that fundamentally reshaped regional geopolitics, left an indelible mark on modern geography and left behind a literal time capsule on the ocean floor.

The sheer scale of the battle forms the spine of our coverage. We chart the chronological narrative of the battle itself, highlighting the brilliant defensive positioning of Swedish Lieutenant-Colonel Carl

Olof Cronstedt. He lured the overconfident Russian commander, Prince Charles of Nassau-Siegen, into a deadly choke point. The Russian fleet was utterly bottlenecked, leading to a catastrophic defeat.

Nowhere is this tragedy clearer than in the haunting story of the Russian frigate ***St Nikolai***. Its captain, Samuel E. Marshall, chose to go down with his ship rather than surrender. Discovered in 1948, the wreck has yielded over 2,300 perfectly preserved artefacts, offering an unmatched glimpse into 18th-century naval life.

Sweden's masterstroke was its Archipelago Fleet (*skärgårdsflottan*). These weren't clumsy deep-sea galleons. Designed by the legendary naval architect Fredrik Henrik af Chapman, these small, highly manoeuvrable, oar-supported vessels were custom-built for the shallow, rocky maze of the Baltic coast. They proved that terrain and innovation can soundly defeat raw size.

To understand *why* men were dying in the skerries, one must look inland. King Gustav III of Sweden didn't launch the Russo-Swedish War out of strength, but out of domestic political desperation. Facing fierce internal aristocratic opposition after his

1772 autocratic coup, he sought a short, victorious war to consolidate his power.

He struck at a brilliant time. The powder keg of the Baltic was highly volatile; Catherine the Great was heavily distracted by the Russo-Turkish War to the south, while Western powers like Great Britain and Prussia actively cheered for anything that would weaken Russia. It was an era of intense spies, schemes and grand strategy, famously kicked off by the "Puumala incident" a staged, false-flag attack where Swedish soldiers wore fake Russian uniforms to create a pretext for war.

The fallout of July 10 echoed for generations. Financially exhausted, both empires signed the Treaty of Värälä. On paper, it changed nothing, returning borders to the *status quo ante bellum*. Yet, it changed everything; Russia was forced to finally stop interfering in Sweden's internal politics, delivering Gustav his political survival.

For Russia, losing 40% of its coastal fleet was a humiliating blow to Catherine's prestige. It forced a massive defensive rethink, sparking a frontier fortification program. Ironically, these very defences, like Fort Slava, became the catalyst for a new regional

hub. The concrete consequence of this military reshuffle was the birth of Kotka, which grew from a defensive Russian outpost into a thriving Finnish port city.

Today, Svensksund endures as a fascinating case study. For underwater archaeologists, it is a pristine time capsule, where 3D modelling now allows us to map the wreckage without disturbing the dead. In Sweden, it lives on as the pinnacle of national naval memory, a celebrated victory against a giant neighbour.

Ultimately, Svensksund offers timeless strategic lessons: it is a masterclass in the perils of overconfidence and a striking reminder that the right force, using the right terrain, can alter history.

Svensksund, July 1790

The Battle of Svensksund, fought on 9–10 July 1790, stands as one of the most remarkable naval victories in Scandinavian history and remains the largest naval engagement ever fought in the Baltic Sea. It was a battle that altered the course of the Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790, rescued Sweden from the brink of military disaster, and demonstrated how tactical brilliance could overcome numerical superiority. More than two centuries later, Svensksund deserves recognition not merely as a Swedish triumph but as a masterclass in naval command, strategic preparation, and the exploitation of geography.

While many naval enthusiasts focus on famous battles such as Battle of Trafalgar or Battle of Jutland, Svensksund was arguably just as dramatic. Here, hundreds of vessels clashed in confined waters amid smoke, wind and chaos. The battle culminated in a

crushing defeat for the Russian fleet and secured one of Sweden's greatest military victories.

The late eighteenth century was marked by intense rivalry between Sweden and the expanding Russian Empire. Swedish King Gustav III launched the Russo-Swedish War in 1788 with the ambition of restoring Sweden's status as a great Baltic power.

By 1790, however, the war had reached a critical stage. Sweden's regular fleet had suffered setbacks, and Russian naval power appeared overwhelming. Earlier that summer, Swedish forces had narrowly escaped destruction during the dramatic withdrawal from the Bay of Vyborg. Although much of the Swedish fleet escaped encirclement, the situation remained perilous.

The king understood that Sweden needed a decisive victory. Without one, Russia would dictate peace terms, and Sweden's strategic position in the Baltic could be permanently weakened.

The location chosen for the confrontation was Svensksund, known today as Ruotsinsalmi, near the southeastern coast of present-day Finland. The area consisted of narrow channels, rocky islands, reefs,

and restricted waterways, conditions that favoured a defensive force familiar with local geography.

This environment would become the stage upon which Swedish ingenuity triumphed over Russian confidence.

Responsibility for organising the Swedish defence fell largely upon Lieutenant-Colonel Carl Olof Cronstedt, one of the most capable naval commanders in Swedish service.

Cronstedt understood that Sweden could not simply rely on bravery. The Russian fleet possessed considerable numerical strength and expected to overwhelm the Swedish position through sheer force. Instead, he developed a carefully structured defensive arrangement designed to channel Russian attacks into zones where Swedish firepower could be concentrated.

The Swedish fleet consisted primarily of vessels belonging to the archipelago fleet, a unique force designed for operations in shallow coastal waters. These included gun sloops, gunboats, archipelago frigates, and other specialised craft ideally suited to Baltic conditions.

Cronstedt deployed his vessels in multiple defensive lines. Artillery positions were established to maximise overlapping fields of fire. The narrow approaches meant that Russian vessels would struggle to manoeuvre freely once committed to battle.

Most importantly, the Swedish commander recognised the importance of the weather. Wind conditions could significantly affect sailing vessels operating in restricted waters. A fleet trapped in unfavourable winds could quickly lose cohesion and become vulnerable. This appreciation of local conditions would prove decisive.

The Russian fleet was commanded by Prince Charles of Nassau-Siegen, an experienced and ambitious officer with a reputation for aggressiveness. Nassau-Siegen had previously enjoyed success and believed that decisive offensive action would crush Swedish resistance. His fleet outnumbered the Swedish defenders and included a formidable collection of galleys and gunboats.

From the Russian perspective, the situation appeared straightforward. The Swedish fleet had been weakened during previous operations and seemed vulnerable. A vigorous assault would supposedly

shatter Swedish morale and deliver a conclusive victory.

Yet confidence can become a liability. Rather than carefully evaluating the constraints imposed by Svensksund's geography, Nassau-Siegen elected to commit much of his force directly into the narrow waterways protecting the Swedish position. This decision would become the defining error of the campaign.

The morning of 9 July opened with Russian preparations for a major offensive. As Russian vessels advanced toward the Swedish lines, the scale of the operation became apparent. Hundreds of craft crowded the approaches, creating a dense concentration of naval power. The spectacle must have been extraordinary: rows of galleys, gunboats, and support vessels advancing through the Baltic haze while drums beat and signals flashed across the water.

Initially, Russian commanders expected rapid success. Instead, they encountered fierce resistance. Swedish artillery opened fire from carefully prepared positions. The confined waters prevented Russian vessels from deploying effectively. Ships attempting to advance found themselves constrained by geography and by the movements of neighbouring vessels.

The result was congestion.

Rather than presenting an organised battle line, Russian formations became compressed and increasingly difficult to control. Orders took longer to execute. Manoeuvres became hazardous. Some vessels obstructed others, while artillery fire from Swedish positions inflicted mounting casualties.

Throughout the day, Russian attacks continued. Again and again, Swedish gunners exploited their defensive advantage. Every attempt to force a breakthrough met concentrated resistance. The Russian numerical advantage could not be fully utilised because only a limited number of vessels could engage effectively at any one time. Cronstedt's preparations were working exactly as intended.

By the evening of 9 July, the battle had already become far more costly for Russia than expected. Russian commanders faced growing difficulties. Ships had suffered damage. Crews were exhausted. Communications across the crowded fleet were increasingly unreliable.

Yet Nassau-Siegen remained committed to offensive action. Rather than disengaging and reassessing

the situation, the Russian fleet maintained pressure on the Swedish position. This decision further increased the concentration of vessels within the restricted waterways.

Meanwhile, Swedish morale rose. The defenders had successfully held their ground against repeated attacks. Their commanders retained control of the battlefield, and their formations remained largely intact. Crucially, weather conditions were beginning to shift.

The second day of battle brought the decisive turning point. Changes in wind conditions created severe problems for the Russian fleet. Vessels already crowded into narrow channels found manoeuvring increasingly difficult. Some drifted into unfavourable positions. Others became entangled in the confusion surrounding them.

What had been congestion now became chaos. Swedish commanders immediately recognised the opportunity.

Rather than merely defending their position, they intensified their attacks against vulnerable Russian formations. Concentrated artillery fire battered ships

unable to reposition effectively. Damaged vessels collided with one another. Some ran aground on reefs and shoals.

The Russian fleet's numerical superiority ceased to matter. In many sectors, Russian ships were unable to bring their weapons to bear efficiently. Others found themselves trapped by the very mass of vessels intended to ensure victory. Cronstedt's defensive system had transformed into an offensive weapon.

As the battle intensified, Russian command and control began to break down. Smoke from cannon fire obscured visibility. Signals became difficult to interpret. Individual captains increasingly acted independently as central coordination weakened.

The consequences were catastrophic. Several Russian vessels were destroyed outright. Others were captured. Some crews abandoned their ships. Panic spread through portions of the fleet as commanders realised the extent of the disaster unfolding around them.

Swedish forces maintained pressure relentlessly. The battle evolved from a contested engagement into a rout. Entire groups of Russian vessels attempted

withdrawal, but the congested waterways and adverse conditions made organised retreat extraordinarily difficult. Ships collided, grounded, or became easy targets for Swedish artillery. By the time the fighting subsided, the Russian fleet had suffered one of the worst naval defeats in its history.

The Swedish triumph at Svensksund was immense. Russian losses included dozens of vessels sunk, captured, or abandoned. Thousands of sailors and soldiers were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Swedish losses, while significant, were dramatically lower.

The disparity shocked observers throughout Europe. Many foreign military analysts had assumed that Russia's superior resources would eventually prevail. Instead, a smaller force had achieved a crushing victory through preparation, discipline, and tactical excellence. The battle remains one of the largest naval engagements ever fought in terms of participating vessels. Few actions in Baltic history have approached its scale.

In my view, the battle's outcome ultimately reflects the contrast between two very different approaches to command. Cronstedt respected geography. He understood that the battlefield itself could become

a weapon. Every Swedish deployment was designed to maximise the advantages offered by narrow channels, defensive positioning, and local knowledge.

He also displayed remarkable patience. Rather than seeking glory through reckless attacks, he allowed the Russians to enter conditions that favoured Sweden before delivering decisive blows.

Perhaps most importantly, he anticipated how weather and manoeuvrability would influence events. In naval warfare, environmental conditions often matter as much as firepower. Cronstedt recognised this reality better than his opponent.

The Russian defeat cannot be explained solely by Swedish excellence. Nassau-Siegen made a fundamental strategic mistake by committing his fleet too deeply into confined waters where its numerical superiority could not be effectively employed.

A larger force is not automatically a stronger force if it cannot manoeuvre. By crowding vast numbers of vessels into narrow channels, the Russian commander reduced flexibility, complicated communications, and increased the risk of confusion. Once adverse winds appeared, these weaknesses became fatal.

The Russian fleet essentially became trapped by its own concentration. History repeatedly demonstrates that commanders who underestimate terrain or in this case maritime geography, often pay a heavy price. Svensksund stands among the clearest examples of this principle.

The consequences of Svensksund extended far beyond the battlefield. The victory dramatically improved Sweden's negotiating position and helped bring the Russo-Swedish War to an end. The subsequent peace settlement largely restored the status quo, but for Sweden this represented a major success given the precarious situation before the battle.

For King Gustav III, Svensksund provided a powerful political and military triumph. For Russia, it was a rare and embarrassing naval setback during an era otherwise characterised by imperial expansion.

The battle also cemented Cronstedt's reputation as one of Sweden's most capable naval commanders.

The Battle of Svensksund deserves its place among history's great naval engagements. It was not merely a Swedish victory; it was a demonstration of how intelligent leadership, preparation, and an understand-

ing of geography can defeat a larger and seemingly more powerful opponent.

The events of 9–10 July 1790 reveal timeless lessons about warfare. Superior numbers alone do not guarantee success. Commanders must understand the environment in which they fight, adapt to changing conditions, and avoid allowing confidence to become complacency. At Svensksund, Carl Olof Cronstedt did exactly that. Prince Charles of Nassau-Siegen did not. The result was the greatest naval battle ever fought in the Baltic Sea and one of the most decisive victories in Swedish military history.

The dramatic sinking of the *St Nikolai*

History is often written in the language of victories. Yet sometimes the most compelling stories are those of defeat. The fate of the Russian frigate St Nikolai *reminds us that courage is not measured solely by triumph, but by how men face disaster when hope has vanished.*

The eighteenth century was an age of sail, empire and constant naval rivalry. Across the oceans, powerful states competed for territory, trade routes and prestige. Warships became symbols of national ambition, carrying not only guns and sailors but the expectations of governments thousands of miles away. Yet beneath the grand narratives of strategy and conquest were ordinary men whose lives could be transformed or ended in a matter of moments.

Among these forgotten stories is that of the Russian frigate *St Nikolai*, a vessel whose final hours

encapsulate both the heroism and tragedy of naval warfare. Although history remembers great admirals and decisive victories, the sinking of the *St Nikolai* offers something different: a profoundly human tale of leadership, sacrifice, suffering and remembrance.

More than a century and a half after the ship vanished beneath the waves, its wreck was rediscovered. The recovery of over 2,300 artefacts transformed the vessel from a footnote in naval history into a vivid window into the world of eighteenth-century sailors. Through these objects and through the stories attached to them, we can once again hear the echoes of voices long thought lost.

Modern discussions of naval battles often focus on numbers. Historians analyse tonnage, armaments, casualty figures and strategic outcomes. Such details matter, but they can also obscure a simple truth: every ship was a floating community.

A frigate such as the *St Nikolai* carried officers, sailors, craftsmen, cooks, boys learning the trade, and marines tasked with fighting both at sea and on land. These men ate together, worked together and, in many cases, died together.

Life aboard an eighteenth-century warship was harsh even in peacetime. Food was often poor, disease was common, and discipline could be brutal. Sailors endured storms, freezing temperatures and months away from their families. Yet ships also developed powerful bonds. Crew members relied upon one another for survival. Trust was not merely desirable—it was essential.

This is what makes the story of the *St Nikolai* so compelling. When disaster came, it did not strike anonymous statistics. It struck individuals whose fears, hopes and loyalties were every bit as real as our own.

At the centre of the tragedy stands Captain Samuel E. Marshall. Like many naval officers of the era, Marshall lived in a world where honour and duty carried immense weight. A captain was not simply responsible for navigating a vessel or directing combat. He was expected to embody authority itself. The lives of hundreds of men rested upon his judgement.

History often judges captains by whether they won or lost. Such assessments are convenient but incomplete. Leadership becomes most revealing not during success but during catastrophe. Accounts surround-

ing Marshall's final moments have endured precisely because they speak to this reality. The phrase attributed to him "Since I didn't have the chance to show you how to win, I will show you how to die" has the quality of legend. Whether recorded exactly as spoken or refined through retelling, its power lies in what it represents.

The statement reflects a belief deeply rooted in eighteenth-century military culture: that leaders must share the fate of their men. Today, such sentiment can appear romantic or even archaic. Yet in the context of the age, it carried immense significance. A captain who abandoned his crew risked eternal disgrace. A captain who remained with them, even in defeat, could achieve a form of immortality. Marshall's reported words suggest a man confronting the inevitable with dignity. They reveal not arrogance but acceptance. Victory was no longer possible. What remained was the manner in which one faced death.

The sinking of the *St Nikolai* was not merely a military event. It was a human drama unfolding amid chaos, fear and uncertainty. One can imagine the scene. The crack of cannon fire. The smell of gunpowder drifting across the decks. Splintered wood flying through the air with lethal force. Orders shout-

ed above the roar of battle. Men scrambling to repair damage while others loaded guns with trembling hands.

Naval combat in the eighteenth century was horrifyingly intimate. Unlike modern warfare, destruction often occurred at close range. Sailors could see the faces of their enemies. They could hear screams from neighbouring ships.

When a vessel began to fail, panic threatened to spread rapidly. Water flooding the hull represented more than structural damage; it symbolised the collapse of hope. For the crew of the *St Nikolai*, the realisation that the ship could not be saved must have been devastating. Some would have prayed. Others would have thought of distant homes and families they would never see again. A few may have clung stubbornly to the belief that rescue was still possible.

Such moments expose the limits of courage. Fear is unavoidable. Bravery consists of continuing despite it. This is why the story resonates centuries later. We recognise ourselves in these men. Faced with overwhelming odds, they experienced emotions that remain universal.

One reason the *St Nikolai* continues to fascinate historians is that defeat often reveals aspects of character hidden during success. Victories generate celebration. Defeats generate reflection. A triumphant fleet may be remembered for its commanders and tactics. A lost ship invites questions about endurance, resilience and sacrifice. We become interested not only in what happened but in how people responded.

The crew of the *St Nikolai* knew they were unlikely to become heroes in the conventional sense. There would be no victory parade. No medals distributed in a jubilant capital city. Yet their experience arguably tells us more about the realities of naval warfare than many celebrated triumphs.

History has a tendency to glorify winners. The danger is that we forget the countless individuals whose stories ended differently. Ships such as the *St Nikolai* remind us that the past was not composed solely of success stories. It was also filled with loss, grief and unfinished dreams.

For more than a century and a half, the *St Nikolai* lay hidden beneath the water. Time transformed the wreck into an underwater tomb. Timber decayed. Marine life colonised the remains. Memories faded.

Then came one of the most remarkable chapters in the ship's story: its rediscovery in 1948.

The discovery transformed historical understanding. Suddenly, the *St Nikolai* was no longer merely an account preserved in documents and legends. It became a tangible archaeological site.

There is something profoundly moving about shipwreck archaeology. Unlike castles or battlefields, wrecks often preserve moments frozen in time. Objects remain where they were left on the day disaster struck.

The seabed becomes a historical archive. In the case of the *St Nikolai*, the excavation yielded an extraordinary collection of more than 2,300 artefacts. Each object represented a fragment of a vanished world. Together, they allowed historians to move beyond abstract narratives and examine the daily realities of life aboard an eighteenth-century warship.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the *St Nikolai* story is not the ship itself but what was found within it.

Artefacts recovered from wrecks are often described as treasures. Yet their true value lies not in

monetary worth but in their ability to connect us with individuals.

A spoon tells us someone ate from it. A pipe tells us someone sought comfort during long voyages. A button tells us someone once dressed in haste before beginning a watch. A navigation instrument reflects responsibility and expertise. A personal possession hints at a life interrupted.

The 2,300 recovered artefacts reveal a community rather than a machine. They remind us that warships were inhabited by people with routines, friendships, frustrations and aspirations.

Too often, military history focuses on weapons. Archaeology restores humanity.

When examining these objects, we are not merely studying a vessel. We are encountering traces of sailors who laughed, argued, worried and hoped just as people do today.

The famous quotation attributed to Captain Marshall occupies an interesting place between history and legend.

Historians rightly approach dramatic quotations with caution. Memorable sayings often become pol-

ished through repeated retelling. Over time, stories acquire symbolic power that can exceed strict factual certainty.

Yet dismissing such accounts entirely misses an important point. Historical myths often endure because they express deeper truths.

Whether Marshall spoke those exact words or not, the quotation captures the essence of leadership under impossible circumstances. It conveys the values that contemporaries admired and expected from commanders.

In that sense, the phrase has become part of the ship's legacy. The challenge for historians is not simply determining whether every word is authentic. It is understanding why generations continued to repeat them.

The sinking of the *St Nikolai* occurred centuries ago, yet its significance remains surprisingly modern. We live in an age obsessed with success. Public figures are judged by victories, profits and achievements. Failure is often treated as something embarrassing to be hidden.

The *St Nikolai* offers a different perspective. Its sto-

ry suggests that character is most visible when circumstances are at their worst. It asks how individuals respond when success is no longer possible. It challenges us to consider whether dignity, loyalty and courage retain value even in defeat.

That is why the vessel continues to capture imaginations. The ship lost its battle. Its captain died. Its crew suffered a tragic fate. Yet the story survived. Indeed, one might argue that the *St Nikolai* became more meaningful because it was lost. Had it sailed safely home, it would likely have become one warship among many. Instead, its destruction transformed it into a symbol of human endurance.

The story of the *St Nikolai* is not ultimately about naval tactics or military strategy. It is about people.

It is about a captain confronting the end of his command with resolve. It is about sailors facing terror in the final moments of a doomed vessel. It is about the fragile boundary between history and memory. And it is about the remarkable rediscovery of a ship whose secrets lay hidden for generations beneath the sea.

The recovery of more than 2,300 artefacts has allowed modern audiences to reconnect with those forgotten lives. Through these objects, the men of the

St Nikolai cease to be statistics. They become individuals once more.

If there is a lesson in their story, it is that history's greatest value lies not in celebrating victories but in understanding humanity. The *St Nikolai* may have sunk beneath the waves, but the courage, tragedy and dignity associated with its final voyage continue to rise to the surface, reminding us that sometimes the most powerful stories are those of noble defeat.

The Archipelago Fleet

How a neglected branch of the Swedish armed forces revolutionised naval warfare and humbled a larger Russian fleet

When discussing the great naval innovations of the eighteenth century, historians often focus on Britain's battle fleets, France's maritime ambitions, or the rise of Russian sea power under Peter the Great and his successors. Yet hidden among the thousands of islands, skerries, and narrow channels of the Baltic lies one of the most fascinating military experiments in European history: Sweden's Archipelago Fleet, or *Skärgårdsflottan*.

In my view, the Archipelago Fleet represents one of the most innovative and underrated military organisations of the Age of Sail. Created specifically to fight in coastal waters where traditional warships were ineffective, it demonstrated how geography, technol-

ogy, and tactical thinking could combine to offset numerical inferiority. At its heart stood the brilliant naval architect Fredrik Henrik af Chapman, whose designs transformed Sweden's coastal defence and provided a striking example of asymmetric warfare long before the term existed.

The story of the Archipelago Fleet is not merely one of ships and battles. It is a lesson in adaptation, ingenuity, and the importance of understanding the environment in which war is fought.

Sweden's geography dictated its naval needs. Stretching along the eastern coast of Scandinavia and facing the vast Baltic Sea, Sweden possessed one of the world's most complex coastlines. Thousands of islands formed intricate archipelagos, particularly around Stockholm, Åland, and the Finnish coast, which at the time belonged to the Swedish realm.

These waters were both a blessing and a curse. The countless islands provided natural protection against invasion, but they also created operational challenges. Large ships-of-the-line, designed for open-ocean battles, struggled to manoeuvre through narrow channels and shallow waters. Deep draught vessels risked grounding, while shifting winds could leave even powerful fleets helpless among the islands.

Russia, Sweden's principal rival in the Baltic, posed a growing threat throughout the eighteenth century. As Russian naval power expanded, Swedish military planners recognised a fundamental problem: their conventional navy could not effectively defend the archipelagos where any invasion was likely to occur.

The solution was radical. Instead of adapting existing warships, Sweden created an entirely separate naval force designed specifically for coastal warfare.

The Archipelago Fleet emerged formally in 1756, though its roots stretched back to earlier coastal defence efforts. Unlike the traditional navy, the fleet fell under army control rather than naval command. This unusual arrangement reflected its primary purpose: supporting land operations along the coast and preventing enemy landings.

Its vessels were designed to operate where ordinary warships could not. They could navigate shallow waters, move through narrow passages, and often rely on oars as well as sails. This combination gave them remarkable flexibility. In calm conditions where sailing vessels became immobile, Archipelago Fleet ships could continue advancing under human power.

The concept was revolutionary. Rather than seeking decisive fleet engagements on the open sea, Sweden aimed to dominate the coastal environment. It recognised that victory did not necessarily require matching Russia ship for ship. Instead, it required controlling the terrain or, in this case, the seascape.

This strategic insight remains relevant today. Smaller powers frequently succeed when they shape military doctrine around local advantages rather than attempting to mirror larger adversaries.

No discussion of the Archipelago Fleet can avoid the towering figure of Fredrik Henrik af Chapman. Fredrik Henrik af Chapman was one of the most influential naval architects in history. Although less famous internationally than some of his British contemporaries, his contributions to ship design were extraordinary.

Chapman approached naval construction scientifically. At a time when many shipbuilders relied heavily on tradition and experience, he employed mathematical calculations, systematic measurements, and rigorous experimentation. His methods anticipated modern naval engineering by decades.

What makes Chapman particularly remarkable is that he understood a simple truth often overlooked by military planners: ships should be designed for the environment in which they fight. Instead of building smaller versions of conventional warships, Chapman created entirely new vessel types suited to Baltic archipelago warfare.

His designs included:

- Gun sloops
- Gun yawls
- Turuma frigates
- Hemmema frigates
- Udema frigates
- Pojama vessels

Many combined shallow draughts, heavy armament, and rowing capability. To modern eyes, some appeared awkward hybrids. Yet they represented sophisticated solutions to unique tactical requirements.

The genius of Chapman's designs lay in their specialisation.

Traditional ships-of-the-line depended heavily on broadside fire and favourable winds. Their enormous size provided firepower but reduced flexibility.

Chapman's vessels prioritised manoeuvrability. Many carried surprisingly heavy guns relative to their size. Some could position themselves in shallow waters inaccessible to larger Russian warships. Others could maintain movement even when winds failed.

This created several advantages. First, Swedish forces could choose where engagements occurred. Second, they could exploit narrow channels that neutralised enemy numerical superiority. Third, they could rapidly shift forces through complex archipelago routes unfamiliar to invaders. In effect, Chapman transformed geography into a weapon. The islands themselves became part of Sweden's defensive system.

The ultimate test came during the Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790. This conflict saw intense fighting across the Baltic and provided the Archipelago Fleet with opportunities to demonstrate its value.

The war began poorly for Sweden. Strategic expectations often exceeded operational realities, and Russian naval power remained formidable.

Yet within the archipelagos, the balance shifted. Swedish coastal forces repeatedly exploited their su-

perior knowledge of local waters. Their specialised vessels could move through areas that constrained Russian operations, enabling ambushes, rapid concentration of force and tactical flexibility. The fleet's effectiveness culminated in several important engagements that showcased the viability of Sweden's approach.

The most dramatic example came at the Second Battle of Svensksund in July 1790. Second Battle of Svensksund remains one of the largest naval battles ever fought in the Baltic Sea.

The Swedish force faced a larger Russian fleet. Conventional wisdom might have predicted a Russian victory. Numerically superior fleets often prevailed during the eighteenth century, particularly when supported by greater resources and manpower.

Yet the outcome proved otherwise. Swedish commanders used favourable positioning, local knowledge, and the unique capabilities of the Archipelago Fleet to devastating effect. The battle unfolded within conditions that reduced many Russian advantages while maximising Swedish strengths.

Russian formations became disorganised. Swedish vessels manoeuvred effectively through challenging

waters. The result was a crushing Swedish victory. Dozens of Russian vessels were captured, sunk, or destroyed. Thousands of Russian sailors became casualties or prisoners. The defeat shocked observers across Europe.

Svensksund demonstrated a timeless military principle: superiority in numbers does not guarantee success when the battlefield favours the defender.

It would be simplistic to attribute Sweden's successes solely to superior ships. Russian commanders faced a difficult operational environment. The Baltic archipelagos fragmented formations, complicated communications, and limited manoeuvre space. Large fleets struggled to maintain cohesion. Wind conditions changed rapidly. Navigation errors could prove disastrous.

The Archipelago Fleet was specifically designed to exploit these difficulties. Its vessels functioned as force multipliers. They enabled Swedish commanders to leverage geography more effectively than their opponents.

In many respects, Russia encountered a problem familiar to great powers throughout history. Military strength built for conventional operations proved

less effective within a specialised environment controlled by an adaptive opponent.

What makes the Archipelago Fleet particularly fascinating is how modern its underlying logic feels. Today, military analysts frequently discuss asymmetric warfare—the idea that smaller states can offset disadvantages through innovation, local knowledge, and specialised capabilities.

The Archipelago Fleet embodied precisely this approach. Sweden could not easily match Russia's resources. Instead, it developed tools specifically designed to exploit Russian weaknesses. This was not a strategy of desperation. It was a strategy of intelligence.

Rather than asking, "How can we build a bigger fleet?" Swedish planners asked, "How can we make the enemy's advantages irrelevant?" That question remains at the heart of successful military strategy.

Fredrik Henrik af Chapman deserves recognition alongside the great military innovators of his age. His influence extended beyond Sweden.

His scientific approach to shipbuilding helped shape naval architecture throughout Europe. Many

principles he championed, standardisation, measurement, testing and engineering analysis, became central to modern naval design.

Yet his greatest achievement may have been conceptual rather than technical. He understood that military effectiveness arises not from building the biggest weapons but from building the right weapons. The Archipelago Fleet was successful because it reflected Sweden's strategic reality.

It matched means to objectives. It aligned technology with geography. It transformed limitations into strengths. Few military innovations achieve such harmony.

The Archipelago Fleet rarely receives the attention granted to the great battle fleets of Britain, France, or Russia. This is unfortunate, because its story offers some of the most valuable lessons in military history.

It showed that innovation can outweigh numbers. It demonstrated the power of specialised design. It proved that understanding geography can be as important as possessing superior firepower.

Most importantly, it revealed the brilliance of Fredrik Henrik af Chapman, whose vessels turned Swe-

den's labyrinth of islands into one of the most formidable defensive systems in Europe.

In an era obsessed with massive ships and decisive fleet battles, the Archipelago Fleet pursued a different path. It embraced agility over size, adaptation over convention, and local superiority over global ambition.

That is why, more than two centuries later, Sweden's *Skärgårdsflottan* deserves to be remembered not merely as a curious historical footnote, but as one of the most ingenious naval forces ever created.

A King's gamble

History often remembers wars as clashes between nations, struggles over territory, dynastic rivalries, or ideological conflicts. Yet some wars begin not because a nation demands them, but because a ruler desperately needs them. The Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790 stands as one of the clearest examples of a conflict born from domestic political calculation. When King Gustav III of Sweden launched his attack against Russia in 1788, he was not merely seeking military glory or strategic advantage. He was gambling for his political survival.

The king hoped that a swift and victorious war would unite a divided nation behind his throne, silence his aristocratic opponents, and legitimise the increasingly autocratic regime he had established sixteen years earlier through a coup d'état. Instead, the war exposed deep divisions within Swedish society, provoked open military rebellion, and nearly de-

stroyed the very authority Gustav sought to strengthen.

The story of the Russo-Swedish War is therefore not merely one of battles and diplomacy. It is the story of a monarch attempting to use foreign policy as a weapon against domestic opposition. It is a cautionary tale about the dangers of political leaders seeking salvation through military adventure.

To understand why Gustav III chose war, one must first understand the political environment he inherited. Following the death of King Charles XII in 1718, Sweden entered what became known as the Age of Liberty. During this period, royal power was significantly reduced, and authority shifted to the Riksdag, Sweden's parliament. Political life became dominated by rival aristocratic factions known as the Hats and the Caps.

To many modern observers, the Age of Liberty appears remarkably progressive. Parliamentary institutions flourished, political debate became vibrant, and Sweden developed one of Europe's most active political cultures. Yet the system also suffered from serious weaknesses. Noble families exercised disproportionate influence, factional struggles paralysed

decision-making, and foreign powers frequently intervened in Swedish politics through bribery and diplomacy.

By the time Gustav III ascended the throne in 1771, many Swedes had grown frustrated with political instability. The young king saw an opportunity.

Intelligent, charismatic, and deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals, Gustav believed he could govern more effectively than the aristocratic politicians who dominated the Riksdag. He admired enlightened absolutists such as Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great, rulers who combined strong monarchical authority with selective reforms.

In 1772, Gustav staged a bloodless coup. Using loyal military forces, he seized power and imposed a new constitution that dramatically strengthened royal authority.

The coup was initially popular. Many Swedes welcomed the restoration of order and stability. Gustav portrayed himself not as a tyrant but as a national saviour rescuing the kingdom from aristocratic selfishness and political dysfunction. For a time, the strategy worked.

The problem for Gustav III was that political success often breeds greater ambition. During the early years of his reign, he introduced several reforms inspired by Enlightenment thinking. He promoted religious tolerance, encouraged economic development, and sought improvements in administration and justice. These measures enhanced his reputation both at home and abroad.

Yet beneath the reformist image lay a monarch increasingly determined to centralise power. The Swedish nobility soon became alarmed by Gustav's growing authority. Aristocrats who had once dominated government found themselves marginalised. Traditional privileges were challenged. Royal influence expanded into areas previously controlled by noble elites.

The king's supporters viewed these changes as necessary modernisation. His critics saw them as the erosion of constitutional government.

By the 1780s, opposition among the nobility had become increasingly organised and bitter. Gustav remained popular among many ordinary Swedes, but the political elite that traditionally supplied officers, administrators, and local leaders had become deeply suspicious of his intentions.

This growing hostility created a serious dilemma. Gustav had seized power through a coup and maintained it through personal authority. His legitimacy depended heavily on his image as a successful and dynamic ruler. If that image weakened, the foundations of his regime could quickly become unstable. The king needed a dramatic success.

Events beyond Sweden's borders appeared to provide exactly what Gustav required. During the late 1780s, Russia was heavily engaged in a major conflict against the Ottoman Empire. The forces of Catherine the Great were fighting far to the south, and many observers believed Russia's military resources were stretched thin.

For Gustav, the situation seemed ideal. Sweden had lost significant territories to Russia during previous conflicts, particularly after the Great Northern War. National memories of Swedish great-power status remained strong. Many Swedes still dreamed of restoring lost prestige and influence around the Baltic Sea.

A successful war against Russia could achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. It could revive national pride. It could strengthen Sweden's international position. Most importantly, it could unite the country behind the king.

Throughout history, rulers facing domestic challenges have often discovered that foreign conflicts create powerful opportunities for political consolidation. External threats encourage national unity. Critics risk appearing unpatriotic. Military victories generate prestige that can be converted into political capital.

Gustav III understood this logic perfectly. Indeed, there is strong evidence that domestic political considerations were among his primary motivations for launching the war. The conflict offered a means of bypassing political opposition and appealing directly to patriotic sentiment. The king was betting that military success would solve his domestic problems.

One of the most revealing aspects of the war's origins concerns the justification for its outbreak. Under Sweden's constitutional arrangements, offensive wars required parliamentary approval. Gustav therefore faced a significant legal obstacle. Many members of the political elite opposed military confrontation with Russia.

The solution was ingenious, if deeply questionable. According to widely accepted historical accounts, Swedish authorities staged an incident near the Rus-

sian border. Soldiers dressed in Russian uniforms allegedly attacked Swedish positions, creating the appearance of Russian aggression. This manufactured provocation provided Gustav with the pretext he needed to claim that Sweden was acting in self-defence.

Whether every detail of the story can be fully verified remains debated among historians. What is beyond dispute is that Gustav worked aggressively to present Russia as the aggressor and Sweden as the victim. The king needed the war to appear defensive because constitutional constraints made a clearly offensive conflict politically dangerous. The very necessity of creating such a justification reveals the fundamental weakness of Gustav's position. A truly popular war would not have required elaborate political theatre.

When Swedish forces crossed into action during the summer of 1788, Gustav expected enthusiasm and unity. Instead, he encountered resistance. Many officers were unconvinced by the war's justification. Large numbers came from aristocratic families already hostile to the king. They viewed the conflict less as a national necessity than as a royal political project.

The result was the remarkable Anjala Conspiracy. A group of Swedish officers stationed in Finland openly challenged the war. They argued that it lacked legal legitimacy and sought negotiations with Russia. Some even contemplated political arrangements that bordered on outright rebellion.

This was precisely the opposite of what Gustav had intended. Rather than silencing opposition, the war exposed it. Rather than unifying the nation, it deepened divisions. Rather than demonstrating strength, it revealed vulnerabilities within the monarchy and military.

The fact that Swedish officers were willing to challenge their king during an ongoing war demonstrated how fragile Gustav's political position had become. His gamble appeared to be failing.

Yet Gustav III possessed remarkable political instincts. Faced with elite opposition, he shifted strategy. Instead of relying on aristocratic support, he increasingly appealed to commoners, clergy, burghers, and lower-ranking groups within society.

The king presented himself as the defender of the nation against both foreign enemies and selfish aristocratic conspirators. He skilfully transformed oppo-

sition to the war into evidence of noble disloyalty.

This political manoeuvre culminated in the Act of Union and Security of 1789. Using wartime conditions and patriotic pressure, Gustav pushed through legislation that further strengthened royal authority while reducing noble privileges. The measure represented one of the most significant expansions of monarchical power in Swedish history.

Ironically, the war that initially threatened Gustav's position ultimately provided an opportunity to consolidate power. His political objectives were achieved not through military triumph but through domestic confrontation. The king had successfully weaponised the crisis.

Militarily, the war proved far less glorious than Gustav had envisioned. Sweden achieved some notable successes, particularly at sea. The most famous came during the Battle of Svensksund in 1790, where Swedish naval forces won a major victory against Russia.

Yet the conflict never produced the decisive triumph Gustav had hoped would transform Swedish politics. Neither side achieved overwhelming suc-

cess. Resources were exhausted. Strategic objectives remained largely unfulfilled. The conflict ended with the Treaty of Värälä in 1790.

The treaty essentially restored the status quo. No significant territorial changes occurred. Sweden gained prestige from having resisted a more powerful neighbour, but the kingdom did not recover lost lands or dramatically alter the balance of power in northern Europe.

Measured purely in military terms, the war was largely inconclusive. Measured politically, however, the results were more complex. Gustav emerged stronger than he had been in 1788. The conflict had enabled him to weaken aristocratic opposition and expand royal authority. But the victory was temporary. The bitterness generated by his policies continued to fester.

The deepest irony of Gustav's political gamble lies in what happened next. The king succeeded in strengthening his authority during the war years. Yet he never resolved the underlying tensions that had driven him to seek military distraction in the first place.

Many nobles regarded him as a tyrant. Political resentment intensified rather than disappeared. Opposition became more radical. In 1792, only two years after the war's conclusion, Gustav III was assassinated during a masked ball at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. The attack was carried out by conspirators drawn largely from aristocratic circles hostile to his rule.

His death represented the final verdict on his strategy. The war had delayed political reckoning but had not prevented it. Military conflict had provided temporary relief from domestic pressures, yet it could not eliminate the fundamental divisions within Swedish society. The king's attempt to secure his political future through war ultimately failed.

The Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790 demonstrates how domestic politics can drive nations into conflict just as powerfully as international disputes. Gustav III did not launch the war solely because of strategic concerns or territorial ambitions. He sought political salvation. Facing growing opposition, declining consensus, and challenges to his authority, he believed that a short, victorious war could restore national unity and secure his position.

The plan contained a certain logic. History offered numerous examples of rulers benefiting from military success. National victories often do strengthen governments.

Yet Gustav underestimated the depth of domestic opposition and overestimated the unifying power of war.

His conflict with Russia exposed divisions instead of healing them. It produced rebellion among officers, intensified aristocratic hostility, and revealed the limits of political legitimacy based on personal authority.

Although he managed to strengthen his power temporarily, the underlying crisis remained unresolved. Within a few years, the king who had sought security through war was dead at the hands of his political enemies.

The story remains strikingly relevant. Leaders throughout history have been tempted to use foreign conflicts to distract from domestic troubles, rally public support, and consolidate authority. Sometimes the strategy works. Often it does not.

Gustav III's gamble serves as a reminder that wars

begun for political convenience rarely unfold according to plan. What appears to be a masterstroke of statecraft can easily become a trap of a ruler's own making. The king sought victory abroad to secure peace at home. Instead, he discovered that no battlefield success can permanently substitute for genuine political legitimacy.

The powder keg of the Baltic

History often remembers battles as isolated events, dramatic clashes of fleets and armies that seem to emerge from nowhere. Yet the great naval confrontation that erupted in the Baltic during 1790 was not merely the product of local tensions between Sweden and Russia. Rather, it was the culmination of a complex web of geopolitical rivalries stretching from the frozen waters of the Gulf of Finland to the battlefields of the Ottoman Empire. By 1790, Northern Europe had become a powder keg, and the struggle between King Gustav III of Sweden and Empress Catherine the Great of Russia threatened to redraw the balance of power across the continent.

In my view, understanding the Baltic crisis of 1790 requires looking far beyond Scandinavia. The conflict was fundamentally shaped by Russia's simultaneous war against the Ottoman Empire, by the ambitions

of Prussia, and by Britain's determination to prevent Russian dominance in Europe. The Baltic was not merely a regional theatre; it was a focal point in a broader contest over the future of European power.

By the late eighteenth century, Russia had emerged as one of Europe's most formidable powers. Under the rule of Catherine II, better known as Catherine the Great, the Russian Empire expanded at a remarkable pace. Her reign combined military success, administrative reform, and a sophisticated understanding of European diplomacy.

The most significant area of Russian expansion was the south. For centuries, Russian rulers had sought access to warm-water ports and greater influence in the Black Sea region. Catherine pursued these objectives with determination. Following victories against the Ottoman Empire in earlier conflicts, Russia gained territory and influence that alarmed both neighbouring states and distant European powers.

To many observers, Catherine appeared unstoppable. Russia possessed vast manpower, growing economic resources, and increasingly professional armed forces. The Russian navy, once relatively insignificant compared with the fleets of Britain or

France, was becoming a serious strategic instrument. Russian influence extended into Poland, the Black Sea, and the Baltic simultaneously.

This rise inevitably generated fear. For smaller states such as Sweden, Russia's expansion represented an existential challenge. The memory of Sweden's former status as the dominant Baltic power remained strong, despite the kingdom's decline after the Great Northern War. Many Swedish politicians viewed Russian growth not simply as a diplomatic concern but as a direct threat to national survival.

The key factor shaping the Baltic situation in 1790 was Russia's ongoing conflict with the Ottoman Empire. The Russo-Turkish War, which began in 1787, consumed enormous Russian resources. Catherine sought to consolidate Russian gains around the Black Sea and further weaken Ottoman influence. The war became one of the largest military struggles of the era, involving vast armies, expensive campaigns and complicated logistical operations.

From a strategic perspective, the war created a rare moment of vulnerability for Russia. Even a powerful empire cannot focus fully on multiple fronts simultaneously. Large numbers of Russia's best troops were

committed in the south. Supplies, money, and political attention flowed towards the Black Sea theatre. Senior commanders were occupied with campaigns against Ottoman forces rather than threats elsewhere.

This situation did not go unnoticed. King Gustav III of Sweden recognised that Russia's southern commitment offered a unique opportunity. Had Russia enjoyed complete peace elsewhere, a Swedish challenge would likely have been crushed swiftly. With Russian resources divided, however, Sweden had a chance to achieve military and political gains that might otherwise have been impossible.

The Baltic crisis therefore emerged directly from Russia's southern ambitions. Catherine's successes against the Ottomans paradoxically created the circumstances that encouraged her northern rivals to test Russian strength.

King Gustav III remains one of the most fascinating figures of eighteenth-century Europe. Intelligent, ambitious, and theatrical, he believed Sweden could reclaim some of its lost prestige through military action.

Critics often portray Gustav as reckless. There is certainly truth in that assessment. His decision to

challenge a far larger neighbour carried enormous risks. Yet dismissing his strategy as mere adventurism overlooks the broader geopolitical calculations involved.

Gustav understood that timing was everything. Russia's commitment in the south reduced the likelihood of overwhelming retaliation. European powers hostile to Russian expansion might quietly support Sweden. Domestic political considerations also encouraged military action, as foreign conflict offered an opportunity to strengthen royal authority and rally national unity.

In many respects, Gustav's decision reflected a classic principle of international politics: attack when an adversary appears distracted. Whether that calculation was wise is another matter entirely.

One of the most important yet often overlooked aspects of the Baltic crisis was the attitude of Great Britain. At first glance, British interests in a conflict between Sweden and Russia might seem limited. Yet British policymakers viewed European affairs through the lens of balance-of-power politics. Any dramatic increase in Russian influence raised concerns in London.

Britain depended heavily upon Baltic trade. Timber, tar, hemp, and naval stores from Northern Europe were essential resources for the Royal Navy. Stability in the Baltic mattered enormously to British strategic planning.

More importantly, British leaders worried about the long-term consequences of Russian expansion. If Russia became dominant in both the Baltic and the Black Sea, its influence across Europe could increase dramatically. Such a development threatened the delicate balance that Britain had worked to maintain for generations.

Consequently, British diplomats showed considerable interest in any development that might restrain Catherine's ambitions. This did not necessarily mean direct military intervention. Britain often preferred indirect methods: diplomatic pressure, encouragement of rival powers, and support for coalitions designed to limit expansionist states. Sweden's challenge to Russia therefore aligned, at least partially, with British strategic interests.

From London's perspective, a Russia forced to divide its attention between north and south was less dangerous than a Russia free to concentrate all its resources against the Ottoman Empire.

If Britain feared Russian dominance, Prussia saw opportunities within the emerging crisis. Under the leadership of King Frederick William II, Prussia sought to expand its influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Russian success threatened to overshadow Prussian ambitions and potentially alter the regional balance in ways unfavourable to Berlin.

Prussia therefore viewed Russian difficulties with considerable satisfaction. The kingdom actively explored diplomatic arrangements that might pressure Russia from multiple directions. While Prussia's commitment to direct military confrontation remained uncertain, its leaders recognised that a Swedish-Russian conflict could serve broader strategic objectives.

In essence, Prussia hoped to benefit from Russian distraction without necessarily bearing the costs of large-scale warfare itself. This approach reflected a recurring pattern in European diplomacy. Great powers often encouraged conflicts involving rivals while avoiding direct involvement whenever possible. The Baltic crisis offered precisely such an opportunity.

One of the most misleading aspects of the 1790 conflict is the tendency to describe it simply as a Rus-

so-Swedish war. Certainly, Sweden and Russia were the primary combatants. Yet the geopolitical reality was considerably more complicated. Every major European power viewed the conflict through the prism of its own interests. Britain saw a chance to contain Russian influence. Prussia sought leverage against a powerful rival.

The Ottoman Empire welcomed anything that diverted Russian attention from the southern front. Even smaller states monitored developments closely, recognising that the outcome could reshape regional politics.

This broader context transformed what might otherwise have been a limited regional dispute into a matter of continental significance. The Baltic became an arena where multiple strategic interests intersected simultaneously. The result was a level of tension far greater than the military resources directly involved might suggest.

For Catherine the Great, the situation posed a genuine dilemma. She could not simply ignore Sweden. Allowing a challenge to Russian authority in the Baltic would undermine imperial prestige and potentially encourage further opposition. Yet she also could

not abandon the southern war. The struggle against the Ottoman Empire represented years of investment and formed a central pillar of Russian grand strategy. This forced Catherine into a difficult balancing act.

Russian commanders had to distribute resources across multiple theatres. Naval forces became particularly important because maritime power offered flexibility that large land armies often lacked. The Baltic Fleet assumed an increasingly significant role in defending Russian interests while supporting broader strategic objectives.

The challenge facing Russia demonstrates an enduring truth of international politics: even the strongest powers face limitations when confronted by simultaneous threats.

The phrase “powder keg” is often overused, but it accurately describes the Baltic in 1790. Several volatile factors converged at precisely the same moment:

- Russia was engaged in a costly southern war.
- Sweden sought to recover influence and prestige.
- Britain wished to restrain Russian expansion.
- Prussia looked for opportunities to weaken a rival.

- The Ottoman Empire hoped to benefit from Russian distraction.
- National pride and dynastic ambitions intensified political calculations.

Any one of these factors might have produced tension. Together, they created an environment in which conflict became highly likely.

The Baltic region was therefore not merely a backdrop for military operations. It was the focal point of competing visions for Europe's future.

Looking back from the perspective of modern history, it is tempting to view the Baltic crisis of 1790 as a secondary episode overshadowed by larger events elsewhere. Such an interpretation would be a mistake.

The confrontation between Sweden and Russia emerged from some of the most important geopolitical forces of the late eighteenth century. Catherine the Great's ambitions in the Black Sea region, the ongoing Russo-Turkish War, British fears of Russian expansion, and Prussian opportunism all contributed to a highly unstable international environment.

In my opinion, the Baltic conflict demonstrates

how regional wars are often shaped by global considerations. Sweden's challenge to Russia was never simply a Scandinavian affair. It was part of a wider contest involving empires, dynasties, trade networks, and strategic calculations stretching across the continent.

By 1790, Europe's great powers were engaged in a dangerous game of balance-of-power politics. The Baltic became the board upon which that game was played, and the battle that followed was the spark that threatened to ignite the entire powder keg.

The secret war behind the battle

History often remembers wars through battles, heroic commanders, and dramatic victories. Yet the conflict between Sweden and Russia from 1788 to 1790 demonstrates that the most significant struggles frequently occur long before armies march and cannons fire. Behind the clash of fleets and regiments lay a shadow war of espionage, political manipulation, diplomatic intrigue, and calculated deception. The Russo-Swedish War was not simply a military contest; it was a contest of narratives, legitimacy, and grand strategy.

In many respects, the war reveals how eighteenth-century states employed methods that would feel remarkably familiar in the modern world. Political interference, manufactured incidents, covert influence campaigns, and diplomatic isolation all

played crucial roles. The war serves as a fascinating case study of how leaders sought to shape events before the first shot was fired and how intelligence failures and diplomatic miscalculations could prove just as decisive as battlefield defeats.

When King Gustav III of Sweden considered war against Russia, he faced a difficult domestic situation. Although remembered as an enlightened monarch and a patron of the arts, Gustav also possessed a deep desire to strengthen royal authority and restore Sweden's status as a great power.

The Sweden that Gustav inherited was no longer the dominant Baltic empire of the seventeenth century. The catastrophic defeat in the Great Northern War had shattered Swedish supremacy and elevated Russia as the leading power in northern Europe. Many Swedish patriots still remembered the age of Charles XII and dreamed of recovering lost territories, but the realities of power politics were far less favourable.

Gustav understood that a successful war could achieve several objectives simultaneously. A military victory might restore national prestige, strengthen the monarchy at home, and silence political opponents. Foreign policy and domestic politics became

inseparable. War was not merely a strategic calculation; it was a political instrument.

However, Gustav faced a serious constitutional obstacle. Under Swedish law, the king could not simply launch an offensive war at his own discretion. He required either clear evidence of aggression or a convincing justification that Sweden was acting in self-defence. This legal constraint would prove central to the events that followed.

At the same time, Russia was hardly a passive observer. Under the rule of Catherine the Great, the Russian Empire had become one of Europe's foremost powers. The empress viewed Sweden with caution. Although Sweden no longer represented the existential threat it had once posed, any revival of Swedish military strength could create complications along Russia's western frontier.

Russian policymakers recognised that Sweden was politically divided. Gustav's reforms and concentration of royal power had generated opposition among segments of the Swedish nobility. These internal divisions created opportunities for foreign influence.

Evidence suggests that Russian officials maintained contacts with elements of the Swedish opposition.

Such activities were not unusual in eighteenth-century diplomacy. Great powers routinely sought influence within neighbouring states through financial support, political networks, and confidential communications. Russia hoped to constrain Gustav's ambitions by encouraging domestic resistance to his policies.

From a modern perspective, this resembles what might now be called political interference. Yet in the eighteenth century, such behaviour was often regarded as a normal component of statecraft. Courts across Europe cultivated foreign factions, funded sympathetic figures, and sought intelligence through informal networks.

The result was an atmosphere of deep suspicion. Gustav became increasingly convinced that both foreign enemies and domestic opponents were conspiring against him. Whether every fear was justified mattered less than the fact that these perceptions shaped his decisions.

Perhaps the most controversial episode preceding the war was the so-called Puumala incident. According to widely accepted accounts, Swedish planners orchestrated a border provocation designed to cre-

ate the appearance of Russian aggression. Swedish soldiers reportedly donned Russian uniforms and staged an attack near the frontier. The objective was straightforward: provide Gustav with the legal and political justification necessary to initiate military operations.

If true, the incident represents one of the most remarkable examples of a manufactured casus belli in European history.

The significance of the episode extends far beyond its immediate circumstances. It illustrates how governments can shape public perception by controlling narratives surrounding security threats. Gustav required a convincing story that would satisfy constitutional requirements and rally support for war. A carefully engineered border incident offered precisely that.

Critics have long viewed the operation as cynical deception. Supporters of Gustav have sometimes argued that Russia's broader behaviour justified Swedish concerns regardless of the specific circumstances. Yet even sympathetic interpretations struggle to avoid the conclusion that the incident was designed primarily for political consumption rather than military necessity.

What makes the Puumala affair particularly fascinating is its modern resonance. Contemporary discussions about false-flag operations, information warfare, and manufactured pretexts often focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The events of 1788 demonstrate that the manipulation of narratives has deep historical roots.

The lead-up to the war reveals another important truth about eighteenth-century politics: intelligence gathering was often unreliable. Governments collected information through diplomats, merchants, military officers, travellers, and informal agents. Unlike modern intelligence agencies, these networks lacked centralisation and professional standards. Rumours frequently travelled faster than verified facts.

Both Swedish and Russian leaders operated within environments saturated with uncertainty. Reports arrived late. Sources contradicted one another. Personal biases coloured assessments. Decision-makers often acted on incomplete information.

Gustav's government believed that Russia was distracted by its ongoing conflict with the Ottoman Empire and therefore vulnerable. This assessment contained elements of truth. Russia was indeed engaged

on multiple fronts. However, Swedish leaders may have overestimated the extent of Russian weakness.

Similarly, Russian authorities occasionally underestimated Gustav's determination and willingness to take risks. Intelligence can provide information, but it cannot eliminate uncertainty. In this respect, the experiences of 1788 remain relevant to modern policymakers.

If espionage and deception formed one pillar of Gustav's strategy, diplomacy formed another. No prudent ruler wished to fight Russia alone. Gustav recognised that Sweden's resources were limited compared with those of the Russian Empire. To achieve lasting success, he needed allies.

The obvious candidate was the Ottoman Empire. Russia and the Ottomans were already at war, making cooperation strategically attractive. The logic was simple: if Russia had to fight on multiple fronts, Swedish chances of success would increase dramatically.

Sweden did secure support from the Ottomans, but this relationship proved less transformative than Gustav had hoped. Distance, logistical challenges, and differing priorities limited the effectiveness of

coordination. While Russia undoubtedly faced pressure from fighting two enemies simultaneously, the alliance never developed into the decisive partnership Gustav envisioned.

More problematic was Gustav's failure to attract broader European backing. Britain admired efforts to contain Russian expansion but was reluctant to become directly involved. France, traditionally Sweden's most important ally, was descending into the political turmoil that would culminate in the French Revolution. Other European powers preferred caution. Few states saw sufficient advantage in joining Gustav's venture. This diplomatic isolation would become one of the war's defining features.

Gustav's overall strategy possessed undeniable logic. Russia appeared distracted. Sweden possessed a capable navy. Domestic victory could strengthen the monarchy. A successful campaign might restore Sweden's standing in Europe.

Yet grand strategy requires more than a compelling vision. It requires realistic assessments of resources, allies, and risks.

Here Gustav's calculations became less convincing. His expectation of widespread international support

never materialised. His assumptions regarding domestic unity proved optimistic. Many Swedish officers and nobles opposed the war. The emergence of the Anjala League, a group of officers critical of the conflict, exposed serious divisions within Sweden itself.

Meanwhile, Russia demonstrated remarkable resilience. Despite facing challenges elsewhere, Catherine's government retained sufficient strength to resist Swedish ambitions. The war became longer, more expensive, and more politically complicated than Gustav had anticipated. The contrast between strategic aspiration and practical reality is striking. Gustav possessed bold objectives but lacked the coalition necessary to achieve them fully.

One of the most overlooked aspects of the war is that diplomacy continued even while military operations were underway. European governments closely monitored developments. Every victory, defeat, and political crisis influenced perceptions abroad. Diplomats worked tirelessly to shape narratives, reassure allies, and discourage intervention.

In this sense, the war unfolded on multiple fronts simultaneously. Armies fought on land. Fleets battled at sea. Diplomats competed in foreign courts. Intel-

ligence agents gathered information and spread influence behind the scenes. The military conflict cannot be understood in isolation from these broader struggles. Each battlefield affected the others. A naval success could strengthen diplomatic leverage. A political scandal could undermine military morale. Intelligence failures could derail strategic planning. The war was truly a comprehensive contest of state power.

The most remarkable aspect of the Russo-Swedish War may be how contemporary many of its underlying dynamics appear. The conflict featured covert political influence, intelligence gathering, information manipulation, alliance-building, legal justifications for military action, and efforts to shape public opinion. These are not uniquely modern phenomena. They are enduring features of international politics.

The Puumala incident demonstrates how governments may construct narratives to legitimise action. Russia's cultivation of contacts within Sweden illustrates the long history of foreign political influence. Gustav's diplomatic efforts reveal the importance of coalition-building. The failures and misunderstandings on both sides underscore the limitations of in-

telligence. Technology changes, but many strategic principles remain surprisingly constant.

The Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790 was far more than a series of military engagements. Beneath the battles lay a hidden conflict of spies, diplomats, propagandists, and political operatives. The war emerged from a complex interplay of domestic politics, foreign influence, intelligence assessments, and diplomatic manoeuvring.

King Gustav III sought to restore Swedish prestige through a carefully crafted strategy that combined military action with political calculation. Yet his reliance on a questionable pretext for war, his inability to secure major allies, and his underestimation of the challenges ahead exposed the limits of even the most ambitious plans.

Meanwhile, Russia demonstrated that great powers do not rely solely upon armies. Influence, diplomacy, and political leverage often prove equally important. Catherine the Great's government understood that shaping events inside Sweden could be as valuable as defeating Swedish forces in the field.

Ultimately, the war reminds us that history's decisive struggles are rarely fought only on battlefields. They are also fought in royal courts, diplomatic salons, intelligence networks, and the realm of public perception. The secret war behind the battle is often the story that matters most.

The treaty of Värälä

How a peace treaty that altered no borders nevertheless transformed the balance of power in Northern Europe

History often celebrates dramatic peace settlements. The Treaty of Versailles redrew maps. The Congress of Vienna reshaped Europe. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk dismantled empires. Yet some treaties appear, at first glance, to achieve almost nothing at all.

The Treaty of Värälä, signed on 14 August 1790 between Gustav III of Sweden and Catherine the Great, seems to belong in that category. It ended the Russo-Swedish War (1788–1790) without a single territorial change. Neither side gained land. Neither side paid indemnities. The border remained exactly where it had stood before the conflict began.

To many observers at the time and to many readers today the treaty can appear to be the diplomatic equivalent of a draw after two years of bloodshed. Yet that interpretation misses the deeper significance of the agreement.

The Treaty of Värälä was a remarkable Swedish success and a subtle Russian disappointment. It demonstrated that military victory is not always measured in conquered territory and that political independence can be worth more than provinces. The war may have ended with the status quo ante bellum, but the political consequences were profound.

To understand why Värälä mattered, one must first understand why the war began. By the late eighteenth century, Sweden was no longer the great Baltic empire that had dominated Northern Europe under kings such as Charles XII. Defeats in the Great Northern War had reduced Swedish power dramatically. Russia had emerged as the dominant force in the Baltic region, while Sweden struggled with internal political divisions.

In 1772, Gustav III staged a coup that strengthened royal authority at the expense of Sweden's parliamentary factions. While the king enjoyed considerable

popularity, his reforms generated opposition among elements of the aristocracy.

Many Swedish politicians maintained close connections with Russia. For decades, St Petersburg had sought to influence Swedish domestic politics through subsidies, diplomacy, and political alliances. Swedish sovereignty remained formally intact, but Russian influence was an ever-present reality.

Gustav III believed that only a successful war could restore Sweden's prestige, strengthen the monarchy, and reduce Russian interference. In 1788, he launched his ambitious campaign against Russia. The timing seemed favourable. Russia was already heavily engaged in a major war against the Ottoman Empire. Gustav hoped that a distracted Catherine the Great would be vulnerable. It was a bold calculation. It nearly proved disastrous.

The conflict quickly exposed Sweden's weaknesses. Many Swedish officers questioned the legality of the war. Some believed Gustav had engineered incidents to justify hostilities. The resulting dissatisfaction culminated in the so-called Anjala Conspiracy, in which officers sought peace with Russia and challenged the king's authority.

Meanwhile, Russian forces proved resilient despite their commitments elsewhere. The war dragged on with mixed results. Neither side achieved a decisive breakthrough on land. Campaigns were costly, difficult, and often inconclusive.

Had events continued along this trajectory, Sweden might have found itself forced into a humiliating settlement. Instead, the war's decisive moment occurred at sea.

On 9–10 July 1790, Swedish forces achieved one of the most spectacular naval victories in their history during the Second Battle of Svensksund.

The battle involved hundreds of vessels and tens of thousands of sailors and soldiers. Gustav III personally participated in the campaign, understanding that the outcome could determine both the war and his political future.

The result was catastrophic for Russia. Russian losses were immense. Dozens of ships were destroyed or captured. Thousands of sailors were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. The defeat ranks among the worst naval disasters in Russian history.

For Sweden, Svensksund was a triumph of leader-

ship, preparation, and tactical execution. More importantly, it transformed the diplomatic situation. Before the battle, Russia could afford to prolong the conflict. Afterwards, Catherine the Great had compelling reasons to seek peace.

Russia remained engaged against the Ottomans. The resources required to continue fighting Sweden no longer seemed worthwhile. A negotiated settlement became increasingly attractive. Suddenly, Gustav III possessed leverage.

Modern readers often assume that victory should produce territorial gains. If Sweden had won such an impressive naval victory, why not demand land? The answer lies in understanding Sweden's actual objectives.

Contrary to popular mythology, Gustav III's primary goal was not necessarily conquest. Certainly, recovering lost territories would have been welcome. Yet the king's broader aims were political rather than geographical.

He wanted to prove Sweden remained a significant power. He wanted to strengthen the monarchy. Most importantly, he wanted Russia to stop treating Swe-

den as a state whose internal affairs could be manipulated from abroad.

Territory would have been desirable. Political independence was essential. By 1790, Gustav recognised that demanding major concessions could prolong the war indefinitely. Russia still possessed enormous military resources. Although battered, Catherine was far from defeated.

A peace without territorial changes therefore represented a practical and realistic achievement. Sweden had not defeated Russia in the sense of forcing territorial surrender. But it had compelled Russia to negotiate on equal terms.

For a middle-ranking power facing one of Europe's greatest empires, that was no small accomplishment.

The most important aspect of the Treaty of Värälä was not what it changed but what it ended. For decades, Russia had exercised substantial influence over Swedish politics. Russian diplomats cultivated allies within Sweden. Financial support flowed to factions sympathetic to Russian interests. Swedish governments often had to consider Russian preferences when making domestic decisions.

The treaty effectively brought this era to a close. Russia formally renounced claims and practices that had allowed it to interfere in Sweden's constitutional arrangements and internal political disputes. This was not merely diplomatic language.

It represented a recognition of Sweden's political independence. In modern terms, one might compare it to a smaller state compelling a larger neighbour to cease meddling in its elections or domestic institutions.

No territory changed hands, but sovereignty was strengthened. For Gustav III, this was arguably the most valuable prize available. Indeed, one could argue that Sweden gained something more enduring than land: freedom of political action.

From the Russian perspective, the treaty was less satisfying. To be clear, Russia was not defeated strategically. Catherine the Great remained one of Europe's most powerful rulers. Russia retained all its territory and continued its expansion elsewhere.

Yet the outcome still represented a disappointment. Russia entered the war expecting Sweden to be the weaker party. Given Russia's vast resources and

Sweden's internal divisions, many observers anticipated a Russian advantage.

Instead, Russia endured an embarrassing naval defeat and failed to achieve meaningful gains. More significantly, St Petersburg relinquished a useful instrument of influence over Swedish affairs. The concession may have appeared minor compared with territorial losses, but great powers rarely surrender influence voluntarily.

Russia accepted the arrangement because its priorities lay elsewhere. The struggle against the Ottoman Empire demanded attention. The costs of continuing the Swedish war outweighed the potential benefits.

Peace became the pragmatic choice. Nevertheless, pragmatism should not be confused with satisfaction. Russia ended the war having achieved little and having suffered a significant blow to prestige at Svensksund.

In many respects, Värälä reflected the realities of eighteenth-century warfare. Neither side possessed the means or perhaps the desire to continue fighting indefinitely. Sweden lacked the strength to invade deep into Russian territory. Russia lacked sufficient

incentive to commit overwhelming resources against Sweden while facing challenges elsewhere.

The treaty emerged from mutual exhaustion and mutual calculation. Yet this should not lead us to dismiss it as meaningless. Too often, historians evaluate wars solely by maps. If borders remain unchanged, the conflict is assumed to have accomplished nothing.

The Treaty of Värälä demonstrates the limitations of that view. States fight for security, prestige, influence, legitimacy, and political independence as well as territory. Measured by those standards, Sweden achieved significant success.

The Treaty of Värälä remains one of history's most misunderstood peace settlements. On paper, it appears remarkably uneventful. The border remained unchanged. No provinces were exchanged. No grand territorial settlements emerged. Yet beneath this apparent simplicity lay a genuine Swedish achievement.

Gustav III had entered a risky war against a vastly larger neighbour. Through determination, political resilience, and the decisive victory at Svensksund, he secured a settlement that protected Sweden's sover-

eignty and ended a long period of Russian interference in Swedish affairs.

For Sweden, the treaty confirmed that the kingdom remained an independent actor rather than a client state operating under Russian shadow. For Russia, the agreement was a reminder that military superiority does not always translate into political success.

The Treaty of Värälä changed no borders. Yet it altered the relationship between Sweden and Russia in ways that proved far more significant than a few miles of territory. That is why it deserves to be remembered not as a peace that achieved nothing, but as a peace that quietly changed everything.

The birth of Kotka

The transformation of Finland's south-eastern coast from a contested battlefield into one of the nation's most important urban centres is a remarkable story of war, strategy, and unintended consequences. Few places illustrate this better than the city of Kotka. What began as a response to military defeat and geopolitical anxiety evolved into a thriving port city whose origins can be traced directly to the aftermath of eighteenth-century conflict between Sweden and Russia. The construction of massive fortifications, including Fort Slava and Kyminlinna, reshaped the landscape and laid the foundations for the urban development that followed.

For centuries, the Finnish coast served as a frontier between competing powers. During the eighteenth century, Finland formed part of the Swedish Realm, while the expanding Russian Empire sought greater influence and security in the Baltic region. Repeated

wars between Sweden and Russia devastated many areas of Finland, but the conflict known as the Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790 proved especially significant for the future of the Kymi River region.

Although Sweden failed to achieve its broader objectives, the war highlighted vulnerabilities on both sides. Russian military planners recognised that their defensive network in south-eastern Finland required substantial reinforcement. The Finnish coast represented a potential invasion route towards the imperial capital of Saint Petersburg, and Russian authorities became determined to prevent any future threat from emerging along this frontier. The result was one of the most ambitious military construction programmes ever undertaken in Finland.

Military defeats often trigger reform, and Russia's experience during the conflict was no exception. The imperial government concluded that stronger fortifications were necessary to secure the approaches to Saint Petersburg and to establish control over the strategically important Kymi River area.

The eastern side of the river became the focus of extensive defensive planning. Engineers, soldiers, labourers, and craftsmen arrived in large numbers. Forests were cleared, roads were built, and previous-

ly quiet coastal areas became enormous construction sites.

The scale of the undertaking reflected the strategic importance attached to the region. Russia was not merely building forts; it was creating an integrated defensive system capable of supporting troops, controlling maritime access, and protecting imperial interests in the Baltic Sea. This military vision would have consequences extending far beyond warfare.

Among the most important projects was Fort Slava, known in Finnish as Ruotsinsalmi Fortress. Built on islands and coastal positions near the future site of Kotka, the fortification was designed to control sea routes and serve as a powerful naval base.

The location was carefully chosen. The surrounding archipelago provided natural protection, while narrow waterways could be defended effectively against enemy fleets. Russian engineers incorporated the latest military thinking of the era, combining coastal batteries, defensive earthworks, barracks, and logistical facilities.

Fort Slava represented more than a military installation. It became a centre of economic activity. Thousands of workers required food, materials, ac-

commodation, and transport. Merchants followed the soldiers. Craftsmen established workshops. Local farmers found new markets for their produce.

In effect, the fortress created an entirely new economic ecosystem along the coast. The presence of such a large military establishment generated employment and encouraged settlement, setting in motion patterns of growth that would outlast the strategic concerns that had inspired the construction.

While Fort Slava guarded the maritime approaches, Kyminlinna was intended to secure the landward frontier. Constructed near the Kymi River, Kyminlinna formed a critical element of the broader defensive network. Designed as a modern bastion fortress, it reflected the sophisticated military engineering principles of the late eighteenth century. Thick earthworks, geometric defensive lines, and carefully positioned artillery emplacements were intended to withstand siege warfare and provide strong resistance against invading forces.

The fortress symbolised Russia's determination to transform the border region into a defensive barrier protecting the empire.

Yet what is particularly fascinating is how such military infrastructure influenced civilian development. Fortresses required support services, roads, warehouses, and administrative functions. Settlements naturally emerged around these needs. What began as temporary accommodation often evolved into permanent communities. Kyminlinna became a focal point around which population and commerce gradually concentrated.

History repeatedly demonstrates that military investment can stimulate urban growth. Ancient Roman forts became medieval towns. Colonial garrisons evolved into major cities. The same pattern unfolded on Finland's south-eastern coast.

The Russian fortification programme attracted people from across the empire and beyond. Soldiers settled after completing their service. Traders recognised commercial opportunities. Labourers remained in the area after construction projects ended.

Infrastructure developed rapidly. Roads connected the fortifications with inland settlements. Harbours expanded to handle supplies and military traffic. Warehousing and shipbuilding activities increased.

These developments gradually shifted the region's identity. What had once been a militarised frontier began to acquire the characteristics of a growing urban centre. The irony is striking. Structures built to prepare for future wars became catalysts for peacetime prosperity.

The coastal location that made the area attractive for military purposes also made it ideal for commerce. Deep-water access, sheltered harbours, and proximity to important maritime routes offered considerable economic advantages.

As the nineteenth century progressed, trade increasingly supplemented military activity. Timber exports became especially important. Finland's vast forests supplied growing international demand, and the coastal settlements around the former fortress zone were well positioned to benefit.

Harbour facilities originally developed for naval purposes could be adapted for commercial shipping. Warehouses built to store military supplies found new uses in trade. Skilled workers employed during fortress construction contributed to broader economic development. Gradually, a distinct port community emerged.

The formal establishment of Kotka in 1879 marked the culmination of decades of gradual transformation. By this stage, the military origins of the settlement remained visible, yet the city's future increasingly depended upon commerce, industry, and maritime trade rather than defence. Kotka grew rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, becoming one of Finland's most important export ports.

The city's success owed much to its strategic location, but location alone does not explain its emergence. Without the extensive Russian fortification programme following the eighteenth-century conflicts, the urban development of the area might have followed a very different trajectory.

The roads, harbours, workforce, and administrative structures established to support Fort Slava and Kyminlinna created the conditions necessary for long-term growth.

In this sense, the birth of Kotka can be viewed as an unintended consequence of imperial military planning.

Today, visitors to Kotka can still observe traces of this remarkable history. The surviving fortifications

stand as reminders of an era when European empires competed for dominance along the Baltic frontier. They also serve as evidence of how military decisions can shape civilian landscapes for centuries.

The story challenges simplistic interpretations of history. Warfare undoubtedly brought suffering and destruction to the region. Yet the efforts undertaken to prevent future conflict also generated infrastructure, settlement patterns, and economic opportunities that contributed to the emergence of a modern city.

Kotka's development demonstrates that history rarely follows straightforward paths. Strategic calculations made by military planners in the aftermath of war produced outcomes they could scarcely have imagined. Fortresses intended to defend an empire became the foundation stones of a thriving Finnish port city.

The rise of Kotka represents one of the most fascinating examples of urban development emerging from military necessity. Following Russia's determination to secure its frontier after conflict with Sweden, vast fortifications were constructed east of the Kymi River. Fort Slava dominated the coast, while

Kyminlinna guarded the inland approaches. Together, they transformed a sparsely populated frontier into a centre of activity and settlement.

What began as a defensive response to war evolved into something far greater. The fortresses attracted people, generated commerce, stimulated infrastructure development, and ultimately created the conditions for the establishment of Kotka itself.

The city's origins remind us that the legacy of war is not confined to battlefields and treaties. Sometimes, the most enduring consequences are found in the towns and cities that emerge long after the guns have fallen silent. In the case of Kotka, a landscape once defined by military anxiety became a gateway to trade, industry, and prosperity, a transformation that continues to shape the city's identity to this day.

A Russian perspective

History often remembers victories. Defeats, however, can be equally influential, sometimes shaping nations more profoundly than triumphs ever could. For Russia under Catherine the Great, one particular naval catastrophe became more than a military setback; it became a turning point in strategic thinking. The destruction of nearly forty per cent of Russia's coastal fleet and the loss of thousands of sailors and soldiers delivered a severe blow to imperial prestige, challenged assumptions about Russian power, and ultimately encouraged a more defensive approach to securing the empire's vulnerable frontier regions.

From a Russian perspective, the battle represented not merely a tactical defeat but a painful lesson about the limitations of expansion, the fragility of maritime power, and the dangers of overconfidence.

By the time Catherine II sat upon the Russian throne, the empire was expanding rapidly. Her reign was characterised by territorial growth, military reform, and an ambitious foreign policy designed to establish Russia as one of Europe's foremost powers.

The Russian military had enjoyed a series of notable successes during the eighteenth century. Victories against neighbouring powers had fostered confidence among military leaders and government officials alike. There was a growing belief that Russia's rise was inevitable and that its expanding influence would continue largely unchecked.

The devastating naval defeat shattered this perception. The loss of almost forty per cent of the coastal fleet was not simply a matter of replacing ships. Eighteenth-century warships required enormous financial investment, years of construction, and highly trained crews. Every vessel represented a significant commitment of state resources. The destruction of such a large portion of the fleet therefore carried consequences that extended far beyond the battlefield.

Equally damaging was the loss of experienced officers and sailors. Thousands of men perished in the fighting, taking with them years of hard-earned

expertise. New ships could eventually be built, but rebuilding a professional naval culture required far more time. For Catherine's government, the battle served as a stark reminder that military strength could not be measured solely by the size of an empire or the ambitions of its ruler.

Military disasters have always carried political consequences, and Catherine's Russia was no exception. Catherine carefully cultivated an image of enlightened and effective leadership. Her court promoted the notion of Russia as a modernising empire capable of competing with the greatest powers of Europe. Military success formed an important component of this image.

The defeat therefore posed a serious challenge to imperial prestige. Although Catherine remained firmly in control of the state, news of the disaster spread throughout diplomatic circles. Foreign observers interpreted the defeat as evidence that Russia's military machine was not invincible. Rivals and potential enemies were encouraged by the revelation that Russian forces could suffer devastating losses under the right circumstances.

Within Russia itself, the defeat generated anxiety among military planners and regional administra-

tors. Questions emerged regarding fleet readiness, coastal defences, logistical organisation, and strategic decision-making.

Rather than undermining Catherine's rule entirely, however, the setback prompted a period of reflection and adaptation. Russian leaders recognised that future security required more than offensive capability. It demanded resilience.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the defeat was psychological. Before the battle, many Russian commanders believed that continued expansion and aggressive military action offered the best means of protecting imperial interests. Territorial growth had become closely associated with security.

The disaster exposed the dangers of this assumption. Russian strategists increasingly recognised that vulnerable coastlines and frontier regions could become liabilities rather than assets if they were insufficiently defended. The empire's sheer size created enormous logistical challenges. Long supply lines, dispersed settlements, and exposed coastal positions complicated military operations.

The battle demonstrated that even a powerful empire could suffer catastrophic losses if its forces were

stretched too thin or if defensive preparations proved inadequate. As a result, military planners began to place greater emphasis on securing existing territories rather than pursuing constant expansion at all costs.

This shift did not mean that Russia abandoned imperial ambitions. Far from it. Instead, it reflected a more cautious understanding of power. Expansion would continue, but it would increasingly be accompanied by efforts to strengthen fortifications, improve infrastructure, and establish more secure defensive positions.

One of the most enduring outcomes of the defeat was the emergence of what might be described as a frontier fortress mentality. Russian officials understood that the empire's borders represented both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The battle highlighted the danger of relying exclusively upon offensive operations to maintain control over strategic regions.

Consequently, investment in defensive infrastructure increased. New fortifications were planned and existing defences strengthened. Coastal installations received greater attention, while military engineers worked to improve the ability of frontier settlements

to withstand attack. Strategic points were fortified not only to repel future invasions but also to provide secure bases from which Russian forces could operate.

The goal was clear: prevent a repeat of the disaster by ensuring that any future enemy would encounter multiple layers of resistance before reaching vital Russian territory.

This approach reflected a broader trend in Russian history. Time and again, Russian leaders would respond to external threats by constructing defensive depth. Geography itself became a weapon. Vast distances, fortified positions, and resilient supply networks formed an interconnected system designed to absorb and blunt enemy advances. The lessons learned from Catherine's defeat fit naturally within this tradition.

The destruction of so much of the coastal fleet also triggered a reassessment of Russia's maritime strategy. Russian naval authorities recognised that numerical strength alone could not guarantee success. Fleet organisation, crew training, command structure, and logistical support required equal attention.

Efforts were made to improve naval administration and strengthen shipbuilding programmes. Greater emphasis was placed upon maintaining readiness rather than merely expanding fleet size. Commanders studied the causes of the defeat in an attempt to identify weaknesses and prevent similar failures.

This process reflected a broader maturation of Russian military institutions. Rather than viewing the battle solely as a tragedy, some reformers saw it as an opportunity to modernise. Defeat exposed weaknesses that victory might have concealed. By confronting these shortcomings directly, Russia could emerge stronger in the long term.

Such thinking would later become a recurring feature of Russian military development. Many of the empire's most significant reforms emerged not after victories but after painful setbacks.

Statistics often dominate discussions of military history, but behind every figure lay human suffering. Thousands of Russian sailors and soldiers lost their lives during the battle. Families across the empire mourned fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers who never returned home.

For many communities, the consequences were immediate and personal. The loss of trained seamen affected local economies and naval settlements. Widows and orphans faced uncertain futures. Veterans who survived carried physical and psychological scars that would remain long after the battle itself had faded from public attention.

From the Russian perspective, these sacrifices reinforced the seriousness of the defeat. The disaster was not merely an abstract strategic setback. It represented a national trauma that underscored the costs of military miscalculation.

There is a paradox at the heart of this story. Although the battle dealt a severe blow to Catherine's prestige and inflicted enormous military losses, it ultimately contributed to a stronger and more resilient Russian state.

The defeat forced military leaders to confront uncomfortable realities. It exposed vulnerabilities that might otherwise have remained hidden. It encouraged investment in fortifications, defensive planning, and institutional reform. Most importantly, it fostered a more balanced understanding of power.

Russia did not cease to be ambitious after the disaster. Yet ambition became increasingly tempered by caution. Expansion would be accompanied by consolidation. Offensive operations would be supported by stronger defensive foundations. In this sense, the battle served as a catalyst for strategic evolution.

From a Russian perspective, the devastating loss of nearly forty per cent of the coastal fleet and thousands of men was far more than a battlefield defeat. It was a profound shock that challenged assumptions about military superiority and exposed the vulnerabilities of a rapidly expanding empire.

The disaster damaged Catherine the Great's prestige, weakened Russian naval power, and inflicted painful human losses. Yet it also inspired a reassessment of military priorities. The empire responded by strengthening frontier defences, improving strategic planning, and adopting a more cautious approach to regional security.

History frequently celebrates victories as moments of transformation. In Catherine's Russia, however, defeat proved equally transformative. The lessons learned amid wrecked ships and lost lives helped shape a defensive mindset that would influence Rus-

sian frontier policy for generations, demonstrating that even the most painful setbacks can become foundations for future strength.

A time capsule on the seabed

Few battlefields preserve history as completely as the seabed. While castles crumble, fortifications are rebuilt, and landscapes are transformed by centuries of human activity, the cold waters of the Baltic Sea have the remarkable ability to freeze moments in time. Nowhere is this more evident than at Svensksund, the site of one of the largest naval battles ever fought in the Baltic and one of the most important underwater archaeological landscapes in Northern Europe.

For more than two centuries, the waters off present-day Kotka in south-eastern Finland concealed the remains of ships, weapons, personal possessions, and the stories of thousands of sailors who fought and died during the Russo-Swedish War. When divers discovered the wreck of the Russian frigate *St Nikolai* in 1948, they opened a submerged archive unlike any other. Since then, thousands of artefacts

have been recovered, maritime archaeology in Finland has been transformed, and the battlefields of Svensksund have become laboratories for some of the most advanced underwater documentation techniques available today.

In many respects, the archaeology of Svensksund demonstrates why underwater cultural heritage deserves the same attention and protection as monuments on land. It is not merely about recovering lost treasures. It is about understanding human lives, preserving memory, and ensuring that future generations can explore the past without destroying it.

The Second Battle of Svensksund, fought on 9 July 1790, was the climactic naval engagement of King Gustav III's war against Imperial Russia. The battle involved hundreds of vessels and tens of thousands of sailors and soldiers. It ended in a decisive Swedish victory and remains one of the largest naval battles ever fought in the Baltic Sea. The Russian fleet suffered devastating losses, with numerous vessels sunk, captured, or destroyed during the engagement.

Yet the true legacy of Svensksund would remain hidden beneath the waves. Unlike many historic battlefields, where the evidence of conflict is gradually erased by agriculture, urban development, or simple

decay, the Baltic environment proved extraordinarily protective. The sea's low salinity and the absence of destructive shipworms allowed wooden vessels to survive in remarkable condition. As a result, ships lost during the battle remained preserved for generations, waiting to be rediscovered.

For historians, this preservation created an extraordinary opportunity. Each wreck represented a sealed historical document. Every timber, cannon, bottle, and personal belonging offered direct evidence of eighteenth-century naval life.

The turning point came in October 1948. During work associated with improving navigation routes near Kotka, an underwater anomaly was detected. A diver sent to investigate encountered something astonishing: a large warship resting on the seabed at a depth of approximately seventeen metres. The vessel lay remarkably intact, complete with cannons and substantial sections of its structure still in place. Researchers soon connected the wreck with the Battle of Svensksund and eventually identified it as the Russian archipelago frigate *St Nikolai*.

From a modern perspective, the discovery could hardly have come at a more formative moment. Underwater archaeology was still in its infancy. Pro-

fessional methodologies were limited, conservation techniques were poorly developed, and many people viewed wrecks primarily as sources of salvageable objects rather than historical sites. Early recovery attempts caused considerable damage to the vessel, and some artefacts were lost forever due to inadequate conservation procedures.

This unfortunate chapter is often overlooked in celebratory accounts of archaeological discovery. Yet it offers an important lesson. The history of the *St Nikolai* is not simply a story of finding the past. It is also a story about learning how to protect it.

Despite the losses caused by early salvage activities, the *St Nikolai* yielded an extraordinary collection of artefacts. Over the decades, thousands of objects have been recovered from the wreck, providing a rare glimpse into everyday life aboard an eighteenth-century warship. Archaeologists uncovered coins, navigation instruments, footwear, buckles, buttons, wine bottles, drinking glasses, coffee cups, tools, and numerous military items. These discoveries transformed the wreck from a military relic into a human story.

What makes these artefacts particularly significant is their context. A single shoe displayed in a museum

case may appear unremarkable. Found aboard a ship that sank during one of the Baltic's greatest naval battles, however, it becomes evidence of an individual life. It reminds us that history is not merely the story of admirals and kings but of sailors, craftsmen, officers, cooks, and ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances.

The collection recovered from *St Nikolai* allows historians to reconstruct details of naval culture that written records rarely capture. The types of drinking vessels used, the quality of footwear, the tools carried by crew members, and even the imported goods present aboard the ship all contribute to a richer understanding of life in the Russian fleet during the late eighteenth century.

In this sense, the wreck functions as a time capsule. Unlike an archive, where documents reflect what officials chose to record, the seabed preserves the physical realities of everyday existence.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the *St Nikolai* lies not in the artefacts themselves but in what the wreck inspired.

The site became central to the development of maritime archaeology in Finland. Beginning in the

1960s, archaeologists, museum professionals and recreational divers collaborated to document and investigate the wreck systematically. Techniques such as underwater photography, photogrammetry, detailed drawing, and underwater filming were introduced and refined through work at the site.

In effect, *St Nikolai* became Finland's underwater classroom. The discovery captured public imagination and encouraged wider interest in underwater heritage. It helped create the foundations for professional maritime archaeology in the country and highlighted the need for legislation protecting submerged cultural resources. The site eventually received formal protection, and today diving within the protected area requires permission from the Finnish Heritage Agency.

This evolution reflects a broader shift in archaeological thinking. Earlier generations often prioritised recovery. Modern archaeologists increasingly prioritise preservation, documentation, and context. The wreck itself is now recognised as an artefact of equal importance to any object recovered from it.

One of the most exciting developments in recent years has been the application of advanced three-dimensional recording technologies to the Svensksund

wrecks. The Finnish Heritage Agency and the Maritime Museum of Finland have undertaken extensive programmes of underwater imaging and photogrammetric recording. Through thousands of photographs, researchers have created highly detailed 3D models of wrecks associated with the Svensksund battlefield, including *St Nikolai*. These digital reconstructions allow scholars and members of the public to examine sites that would otherwise be inaccessible.

The significance of this work cannot be overstated. Traditional excavation is inherently destructive. Once a site has been excavated, its original condition can never be recreated. Three-dimensional modelling offers a less invasive alternative. Researchers can record every visible detail while leaving the wreck undisturbed on the seabed. Future generations can revisit the data, conduct new analyses, and compare changes in the wreck's condition over time.

Equally important is the democratisation of access. Digital models allow anyone with an internet connection to explore these submerged monuments. In doing so, they transform underwater archaeology from a specialist pursuit into a shared cultural experience.

Yet preservation remains a constant challenge. The *St Nikolai* lies close to modern shipping routes, and decades of environmental wear, maritime traffic, and earlier salvage activities have taken their toll. Archaeologists continue to monitor the wreck's condition, while researchers search for additional vessels associated with the battle. New discoveries continue to emerge from the Svensksund area, demonstrating that much of the battlefield remains unexplored.

This ongoing work highlights a crucial reality. Archaeology is not a finite project with a clear endpoint. It is an ongoing dialogue between the present and the past. Every generation brings new technologies, new questions, and new responsibilities. The challenge is not merely to uncover history but to preserve it intelligently.

In an age increasingly dominated by digital information and rapid change, the archaeology of Svensksund offers something profoundly valuable: perspective.

The wrecks remind us that great historical events were experienced by individuals whose hopes, fears, and daily routines were not so different from our own. The artefacts recovered from *St Nikolai* bridge

a gap of more than two centuries, connecting modern observers directly with the people who lived and died during one of the Baltic's defining conflicts.

More broadly, Svensksund demonstrates the importance of protecting underwater cultural heritage. Shipwrecks are not merely collections of valuable objects. They are archaeological landscapes, historical archives, and, in some cases, maritime graves deserving of respect and careful stewardship.

The discovery of *St Nikolai* in 1948 marked the beginning of a remarkable journey. What started as the accidental identification of a wreck became the catalyst for Finnish maritime archaeology, the recovery of thousands of historical artefacts, and the development of sophisticated digital preservation techniques.

Today, as archaeologists continue to map, model, and study the waters of Svensksund, the battle remains alive—not as a tale of military glory, but as a continuing story of discovery. Beneath the Baltic Sea rests one of Europe's greatest underwater archives, a place where history has not vanished with time but waits patiently to be explored.

The Battle of Svensksund in Swedish national memory

Few moments in Swedish military history have achieved the symbolic power of the Battle of Svensksund (Viborgska gatloppet) and the second Battle of Svensksund, fought on 9–10 July 1790 in the waters off present-day Kotka, Finland. It was the greatest naval victory ever achieved by Sweden, a dramatic triumph that reversed the fortunes of a failing war and became a powerful symbol of national endurance. Yet the battle's importance has never rested only on ships sunk or enemies defeated. Its legacy has been shaped by memory, art, political symbolism, and the continuing search for moments of greatness in Sweden's past.

The battle has been remembered not merely as a military event, but as a national story: a moment

when a small kingdom challenged a great empire, when Swedish naval skill overcame Russian strength, and when King Gustav III's ambitions appeared to be vindicated. Over two centuries later, Svensksund remains a fascinating example of how historical victories are transformed into national myths.

The Battle of Svensksund took place during the Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790, a conflict initiated by King Gustav III of Sweden in an attempt to restore Sweden's position as a major power in northern Europe. The war had been disastrous for Sweden. The army suffered setbacks, political opposition grew at home, and the first Battle of Svensksund in August 1789 ended in defeat.

The following year, however, the situation changed dramatically. The Swedish archipelago fleet, commanded by Admiral Carl Olof Cronstedt under the overall direction of Gustav III, confronted the Russian fleet in the narrow waters of Svensksund. Sweden was outnumbered, but the geography of the battlefield favoured the defenders. The shallow coastal waters, islands, and channels allowed the Swedish forces to use smaller vessels with remarkable effectiveness.

The result was a crushing Swedish victory. The Russian fleet lost hundreds of vessels and thousands of men, while Sweden achieved what has often been described as the greatest naval victory in its history. The Treaty of Värälä, signed shortly afterwards, ended the war without territorial changes, but the psychological impact of Svensksund was enormous.

For a country that had experienced the decline of its Baltic empire during the eighteenth century, the victory offered a rare moment of restored confidence.

The memory of Svensksund quickly became connected with the image of Sweden as a maritime nation. The victory was not only celebrated as a tactical achievement but presented as proof of Swedish courage, innovation, and national spirit.

During the nineteenth century, when Sweden was redefining itself after the loss of Finland in 1809 and the end of its great-power ambitions, historical victories became increasingly important. Svensksund offered a comforting narrative: Sweden might no longer dominate Europe, but it had once demonstrated exceptional skill and determination against a powerful enemy.

This process transformed the battle from a military episode into a national symbol. Like other celebrated moments in Swedish history, Svensksund became part of a broader tradition of remembering past greatness. The focus shifted away from the complexities of Gustav III's politics and the costs of war, towards a heroic story of unity and victory.

The battle came to represent an idealised version of Swedish identity: disciplined, resourceful, and capable of overcoming impossible odds.

One of the most important figures in shaping the public memory of Svensksund was the naval artist Johan Tietrich Schoultz. His paintings of the battle played a central role in transforming the event into a visual legend.

Schoultz's works were not simple documentary records. They were carefully composed representations designed to communicate drama, order, and heroism. The ships appear arranged in powerful formations, the sea becomes a stage for national triumph, and the chaos of battle is transformed into a controlled spectacle of Swedish naval skill.

Art was crucial in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because paintings allowed victories to be-

come permanent symbols. A battle that had taken place far from the Swedish public could now be imagined and remembered. Through Schoultz's works, Svensksund became not only something that happened but something that could be seen, admired, and celebrated.

The commissioned artworks surrounding Gustav III's victory reflected the king's own understanding of history and image-making. Gustav III was deeply aware of the power of ceremony and representation. A naval victory was not complete when the fighting ended; it needed to be preserved through monuments, paintings, literature, and public memory.

The memory of Svensksund has always been closely linked with Gustav III himself. The king presented the victory as a personal achievement and a demonstration of enlightened leadership. His presence during the campaign helped create the image of a monarch sharing the dangers of battle with his sailors.

Later generations viewed Gustav III in different ways. Some remembered him as a cultured reformer and patron of the arts; others criticised his political ambitions and authoritarian tendencies. Yet Svensksund remained one of the strongest arguments used

by admirers who wished to portray his reign as a period of national achievement.

The battle therefore became part of the larger debate about Gustav III's historical reputation. Was he a visionary leader who restored Swedish pride, or a ruler whose ambitions brought unnecessary suffering? Svensksund could be interpreted differently depending on the political perspective of those remembering it.

The 150th anniversary of the battle in 1940 was especially significant. The publication of the memorial volume "Svensksund 1790–1940" demonstrated how deeply the event remained embedded in Swedish historical consciousness.

The timing was important. Europe was once again experiencing war, and Sweden found itself surrounded by uncertainty during the Second World War. In this context, memories of past military victories gained renewed emotional importance.

The anniversary celebrations and publications did not simply look backwards. They reflected contemporary concerns about national identity, independence, and defence. Svensksund could be presented as a reminder that Sweden had survived difficult peri-

ods before and that national resilience had historical roots.

The memorial culture surrounding Svensksund showed how historical events are repeatedly reinterpreted according to the needs of the present. In 1790, it was a royal victory. In the nineteenth century, it became a symbol of lost greatness. In 1940, it became a reminder of national endurance.

Every national memory creates a balance between history and mythology. Svensksund was undoubtedly a remarkable military achievement, but the way it has been remembered has often simplified the reality of the event.

The victory did not restore Sweden as a European great power. It did not reverse the political changes that had already weakened the kingdom. The war itself had been controversial, and the victory came at a significant human cost.

Yet myths are not created because events are false. They are created because certain events carry meanings that extend beyond their immediate circumstances. Svensksund became important because it represented qualities that later generations wanted to associate with Sweden.

The battle became a story about courage against overwhelming odds, about naval innovation, and about national survival.

Today, Svensksund occupies a more complicated place in Swedish memory. Modern historians approach the battle with greater attention to context, questioning older heroic narratives while still recognising its importance.

Museums, historical societies, naval traditions, and commemorative events continue to preserve the memory of Svensksund. The battle remains one of the clearest examples of Sweden's eighteenth-century naval ambitions and a reminder of the country's historical connection to the Baltic Sea.

However, its meaning has changed. Rather than simply celebrating military victory, modern interpretations often examine how nations create memories of war and why certain battles become symbols while others fade away.

Svensksund survives because it tells more than the story of a naval engagement. It tells the story of how Sweden has imagined itself.

The Battle of Svensksund was a moment of extraordinary military success, but its lasting importance lies in what happened after the guns fell silent. Through paintings by Johan Tietrich Schoultz, royal propaganda, historical writing, and commemorations such as "Svensksund 1790–1940," the battle was transformed into a national legend.

It became Sweden's greatest naval victory not only because of what happened on the water, but because of what generations of Swedes chose to remember. History records the battle. National memory gives it meaning.

Lessons from Svensksund

History is full of battles where the stronger force wins simply because it possesses greater numbers, more resources, and superior firepower. Yet occasionally, a battle emerges that challenges this assumption and reveals a deeper truth: strength is not merely a matter of size. It is a combination of preparation, adaptability, leadership, geography, and the ability to understand where a battle should and should not be fought.

The Second Battle of Svensksund, fought on 9–10 July 1790 during the Russo-Swedish War, remains one of the most remarkable naval victories in European military history. A smaller Swedish coastal fleet, commanded by King Gustav III and naval officer Johan af Puke, defeated a much larger Russian force in the confined waters of Svensksund (Ruotsinsalmi). The victory was not achieved through overwhelming strength, but through a careful exploitation of terrain, mobility, and defensive preparation.

More than two centuries later, the lessons of Svensksund remain relevant. Modern commanders, business leaders, political strategists, and decision-makers continue to face the same fundamental challenges: how to avoid overconfidence, how to use limitations as advantages, and how to recognise when ambition has carried a force into a dangerous position.

Svensksund is not simply a story of a smaller force defeating a larger one. It is a study in strategic intelligence and a warning against believing that power alone guarantees victory.

The Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790 was driven partly by Sweden's attempt to regain influence lost during earlier conflicts with Russia. By 1790, the war had become a struggle of endurance, and both sides sought a decisive victory.

The Russian Empire possessed enormous military resources. Its navy was larger, its manpower was greater, and its commanders believed they had the capability to crush Swedish resistance. After earlier successes, Russian confidence was high.

The Swedish position, however, was fundamentally different. Sweden could not compete with Russia in a traditional contest of mass and resources. Instead,

it relied on a specialised coastal fleet designed for operations in the shallow waters of the Baltic archipelagos. These vessels were smaller, faster, and better suited to restricted environments.

The battlefield itself became the deciding factor. Svensksund was not an open sea where large fleets could manoeuvre freely. It was a maze of islands, narrow passages, shallow waters, and restricted channels. The environment favoured the force that understood it best. The Russians brought a powerful fleet into a battlefield that reduced their greatest advantage. Their size became a liability.

One of the oldest principles of warfare is that terrain can equalise differences in strength. A mountain pass, a city street, a jungle, or a narrow sea channel can transform the battlefield by limiting movement and reducing the advantage of superior numbers.

Svensksund demonstrated this perfectly. The Swedish commanders understood that they did not need to defeat the entire Russian navy in a direct confrontation. They needed to create conditions where Russian strength could not be fully applied.

The Russian fleet entered an environment where coordination became difficult. Large numbers of

ships created congestion rather than advantage. Communication was harder. Manoeuvring was restricted. The fleet's power was trapped inside a battlefield chosen by the defenders.

The Swedes, meanwhile, operated in waters they knew intimately. Their smaller vessels could move quickly, exploit gaps, and attack from favourable positions.

The lesson is simple but often ignored: A powerful force operating in the wrong environment can become weaker than a smaller force operating in the right one.

Modern strategy follows the same logic. A company with unlimited funding can still fail if it enters a market where it misunderstands local conditions. A military with advanced technology can still struggle if it fights in terrain that neutralises its advantages. A political movement can fail if it assumes popularity in one environment automatically transfers to another. Strength only matters if it can be effectively applied.

The Russian defeat at Svensksund was not merely a tactical failure. It was also a failure of judgement. The Russian commanders underestimated the ability

of a smaller opponent to exploit circumstances. They viewed the Swedish fleet through the traditional lens of numbers: more ships, more guns, more men, therefore a greater chance of victory. But war rarely rewards simple calculations.

Overconfidence creates dangerous assumptions:

- The enemy is weaker than they appear.
- Numerical superiority guarantees success.
- Previous victories will repeat themselves.
- The opponent will fight on favourable terms.

These assumptions have destroyed armies throughout history. A force becomes vulnerable when it begins believing its own superiority. It stops asking difficult questions. It ignores warnings. It assumes the opponent must respond according to its own expectations.

At Svensksund, the Russians entered a battlefield where every advantage they possessed was reduced. They were not defeated because they lacked strength. They were defeated because their strength was poorly positioned.

Perhaps the most important modern lesson from Svensksund is the danger of attacking into a prepared "kill zone".

A kill zone is an area where an attacker's movement is restricted and the defender has maximum control. It can be a narrow valley, an urban corridor, a digital battlefield, a financial market, or even a diplomatic situation.

The mistake is entering such an environment because confidence creates the illusion that force will overcome circumstances. History repeatedly shows otherwise.

Armies have been destroyed when they advanced too far into positions where they could no longer manoeuvre. Businesses have collapsed after expanding into markets they did not understand. Political campaigns have failed after entering battles designed by opponents.

The fundamental error is confusing movement with progress. Advancing is not always winning. Sometimes the most strategic decision is refusing to fight on the opponent's terms.

The Swedish victory also highlights a principle increasingly important in the modern world: agility often defeats size. Large organisations have advantages. They have resources, infrastructure, and influence.

But they also carry weaknesses. They can become slow, bureaucratic, and resistant to change.

Smaller organisations can often react faster. They can adapt quickly. They can exploit opportunities that larger competitors overlook.

This was the Swedish advantage at Svensksund. The coastal fleet was not designed to overpower a major navy in open battle. It was designed for a specific environment and a specific purpose. Its strength came from being specialised.

Modern strategic thinking increasingly values the same approach: Do not try to become stronger in every possible way. Become exceptionally effective where conditions favour you. A smaller force with clear purpose can outperform a larger force without flexibility.

Another lesson from Svensksund concerns leadership. Good strategy begins with accepting reality. The Swedish commanders recognised their limitations. They understood they could not match Russian power directly. Instead of denying weakness, they transformed it into a strategic advantage.

Poor leadership often begins with refusing to ac-

knowledge constraints. Leaders become trapped by pride and reputation. They pursue objectives because they have already committed themselves publicly, not because those objectives remain achievable.

The ability to change direction is not weakness. It is strategic maturity. The greatest commanders in history were not those who never faced disadvantages. They were those who understood disadvantages better than their opponents.

Lessons for the Modern Age

Svensksund offers several enduring lessons:

1. Do not measure strength only by size.
Resources matter, but positioning and adaptability often matter more.

2. Choose the battlefield carefully.
A weaker force can become powerful in the right environment.

3. Never assume the opponent will fight according to your expectations.
The enemy's greatest advantage may be forcing you into unfamiliar conditions.

4. Avoid strategic overreach.
Ambition without realistic assessment creates vulnerability.

5. Mobility and flexibility are strategic weapons.
The ability to adapt can defeat a stronger but slower opponent.

6. Do not enter a kill zone simply because you believe you are stronger.
Confidence without analysis becomes arrogance.

The Second Battle of Svensksund remains a powerful reminder that history does not always belong to the largest force. Victory belongs to those who understand the situation better.

The Russian fleet entered battle believing that superior numbers would decide the outcome. The Swedish defenders understood that the battlefield itself was the weapon.

That is the enduring lesson of Svensksund. The strongest force is not always the one with the most ships, soldiers, money, or influence. It is the one that knows how to use its strengths, recognise its weaknesses, and force the opponent to fight where advantages disappear.

In an age defined by rapid change and complex competition, Svensksund's message remains clear: Overconfidence blinds. Terrain matters. And the force that controls the conditions of conflict often controls the outcome.

The Fate of Empires in Svensksund

Ovi History

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi eBook Publishing
Design: Thanos

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

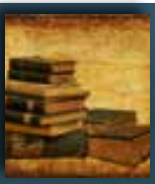
For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

Ovi History

THE FATE OF EMPIRES IN SVENSKSUND

The Battle of Svensksund (July 9–10, 1790) was the largest naval battle in Baltic Sea history.



Studying human history is the process of examining recorded events, while learning it involves internalizing broader patterns and lessons. History reveals the rise and fall of civilizations, technological revolutions, and cultural shifts, helping us understand present-day societies. By analyzing past triumphs, mistakes, and conflicts, we gain perspective on human nature and avoid repeating errors. This knowledge fosters empathy across different eras and regions, reminding us that our shared heritage is a complex tapestry of innovation, struggle and resilience.